

**APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY
IN THE PRAXIS OF RECONCILIATION**

by

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Abstract

Appreciative Inquiry in the Praxis of Reconciliation

This project explored the effectiveness of an Appreciative Inquiry process to effect reconciliation and to restore communion in an ecclesial setting. The thesis was tested in St. Agatha Catholic Church, a church where a pastor had been removed for sexual misconduct. Following an overview of the theory and practice of Appreciative Inquiry, the narrative of the process at St. Agatha is presented. A theology of reconciliation and communion ecclesiology are explored and then used as lenses to reflect on the experience at St. Agatha. In conclusion, the possible location of Appreciative Inquiry in a praxis of reconciliation is presented.

Introduction

In Roman Catholic circles today, to speak about the “polarized Church” has become almost synonymous with “Catholic Church.”¹ It is seemingly impossible to gather in a group of Catholic ministers without the conversation becoming a telling of “war stories.” No matter the ministry setting of the participants- education, parochial, religious congregational leadership or other- soon the topic becomes the difficulty of ministering within a Church that is fragmented along ideological and theological lines. The stories will seldom speak of the value or gift of diversity within the affected faith community because the diversity seems to be inseparably linked to a righteous and vocal intolerance. Usually in these discussions, it becomes quite apparent, although not frequently acknowledged, that the complaining ministers often speak out of their own ideological mindset and are not innocent bystanders to the conflicts and fragmentation which is their source of concern.

In his book, *A People Adrift: The Crisis of the Roman Catholic Church in America*, Peter Steinfels places the contentious and fragmented culture that is visible within the Catholic Church within the broader context of society. Noting the size of the Church in relation to the population of the United States (roughly one fourth of the population), he sees it as inevitable that, as a sub-culture within the whole, the Church would be influenced by our national ethos. He writes:

A church that embraces so many different groups inevitably becomes not only a bridge but also the battleground for the culture wars dividing American society. Many of the issues facing Catholicism mirror those of the larger society: anxiety over rapid change, sexuality, gender roles, the

¹ In this paper the use of “Catholic” or “Catholic Church” will refer to the Roman Catholic Church.

family; a heightening of individualism and distrust of institutions; the tension between inclusiveness and a need for boundaries; a groping for spiritual meaning and identity; doubts about the quality of leadership.²

While his observation resonates with a certain obviousness, it raises an important question as to our understanding of the Church and the appropriate relationship of the Church to the world. Who should be influencing whom?

The conflicts present within the Church are not limited to ideological or theological differences. Especially at the level where people live, their local faith community, we sometimes appear to be a large family squabbling. I've heard stories of squabbles about liturgical practice; about the exercise of authority and how decisions get made; about conflicts that arise out of personality clashes between staff or church members; and many other stories of faith communities that have fractured relationships because of conflict.

Another source of a fracturing of the community is the misdeeds of clergy or other leaders of the faith community. There are many well publicized stories of the life of the community being severely damaged by the betrayal of trust of a pastor that sexually abuses a child or the staff person who embezzles funds. Still another category of conflict seems to be around the difficulties that a faith community experiences when trying to create a community of people with different cultural backgrounds. These cultural differences may be tied to ethnic differences that need to be addressed as a result of immigration or migration patterns within an urban area, but this is also the result of the declining numbers of clergy and the perceived need to consolidate parishes. These parishes may or may not have similar ethnic heritages, but each parish has its own way of

² Peter Steinfels, *A People Adrift: The Crisis in the Roman Catholic Church in America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003), 3.

doing things and relating to one another as a community of faith. Sometimes a consolidation of parishes is like mixing water and oil.

So, how does a Church leader respond to this fracturing of the community? How can the pastoral exercise of leadership facilitate the healing of the community and the reconciliation that is needed to restore the community into right relationship; to restore the communion of the faithful?

It is this pastoral concern that continues to grow within me. I am a member of the Missionaries of the Precious Blood and we claim reconciliation as an element of our charism. As a staff member of the Precious Blood Ministry of Reconciliation (PBMR) we are developing a ministry which responds to the need for reconciliation within the Church and this pastoral concern has been the underlying motivation in my academic work in the Doctor of Ministry program and this thesis-project. Simply, the Church needs to respond to this need for reconciliation within the Church and pastoral leaders need to acquire the understanding and develop a pastoral approach to facilitate the healing of the Body of Christ.

Within the PBMR, a praxis for the ministry is developing using the practical theology approach of: praxis, theological reflection, praxis. It is my hope that this thesis-project will add to that ministerial development. As such, the primary audience for this thesis-project are those ministers who have a primary ministerial focus of working as agents of reconciliation within the Church. A secondary audience would be pastoral leaders (pastors, parochial associates, lay ecclesial ministers, etc.) of faith communities that have been fractured by conflict, who seek to respond to the need for reconciliation as an element of their pastoral leadership of that faith community. And finally, while my

thesis-project will be tested in a Roman Catholic parish, I hope that a recommendation to the praxis of reconciliation will emerge that will be valuable to those working in other Christian denominations or in Roman Catholic faith communities other than parishes (e.g.— schools, religious congregations, etc.).

It needs to be said that there can be no **one** pastoral approach for promoting reconciliation within the Church. Pastoral leaders who wish to respond to conflict within the faith community and be agents of reconciliation need a pastoral methodology that has a broad range of methodological options, all of which must be grounded in an authentic ecclesiology and an understanding of a Christian theology of reconciliation. In this paper I will explore one such approach, placing it within that theological framework.

The thesis being tested in my project is: **Appreciative Inquiry can be an effective strategy for promoting reconciliation and restoration of communion in an ecclesial setting.** Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is an organizational dynamics theory that is recent in its development and it offers a radical shift in our understanding of organizations and organizational change theory. From my first exposure to the theory in the reading of James D. Ludema’s article, “From Deficit Discourse to Vocabularies of Hope: The Power of Appreciation,”³ I was intrigued by AI’s potential to contribute to the praxis of reconciliation. Subsequent reading and course work excited me as I began to envision how the theory might be applicable in ecclesial settings and provide another “tool” that can be used in a ministry of reconciliation.

This paper tells the story of the testing of the thesis stated above and the paper will unfold along the following trajectory. In Chapter One I will provide a brief overview

³ James D. Ludema, “From Deficit Discourse to Vocabularies of Hope,” in *Appreciative Inquiry: Rethinking Human Organizations Towards a Positive Theory of Change*, ed. D.L. Cooperrider and others (Champaign, IL: Stipes Publishing L.L.C., 2000), 265-287.

of the theory of AI. This overview will include the key principles that encompass a radical paradigm shift in understanding organizations and social systems, as well as, the skeleton of what has become a methodology for working with organizations to effect sustainable change.

In Chapter Two I will tell you a story. For this project I accompanied a Roman Catholic parish that was seeking to move forward after their pastor was removed because of the sexual abuse of minors. That betrayal of trust not only affected the young victims, but was a traumatic event in the life of the faith community. With them, I facilitated an AI process. While there is ample evidence in the literature that AI is a valuable and effective planning tool for an organization, I found only limited evidence that it was being used as a means of responding to conflict or the effects of conflict and no evidence that it has been used for that specific purpose in an ecclesial setting.⁴ The process that we did at St. Agatha Catholic Church was to test its effectiveness in fostering and restoring a sense of communion within a faith community. This chapter will be a simple narrative of that process and will include specific references to how I was guided by AI theory and was adapting the AI process to the ecclesial setting. As you read this chapter, referring back to the AI overview presented in Chapter One, may be helpful.

In Chapters Three and Four I will offer a theological framework for reflecting on the narrative of the process. The focus in Chapter Three will be ecclesiology. In the work of reconciliation within the Church, there needs to be a vision of what the Church is to be if it is a faithful embodiment of the will of God; a positive vision which calls the

⁴ See Mark Lau Branson, *Memories, Hopes and Conversations: Appreciative Inquiry and Congregational Change* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2004). While this book describes an AI process in a Protestant church, it was part of a strategic or pastoral planning process, not specifically to effect reconciliation. However, reading this text helped to foster my thinking about the possible place of AI in a praxis of reconciliation.

faith community forward towards reconciliation. Specifically, here I will present an understanding of communion ecclesiology as a vision which can guide this ministry. In this presentation, I wish the readers to note that the approach or method used in developing the ecclesiology, is as important as the ecclesiology presented. The development of our self-understanding as the Church is itself an expression of an ecclesiology. In this chapter, the method used to investigate the questions and issues of ecclesiology is dialogical and reflects the desired communion which is the essential element of the ecclesiology presented.

The focus of the fourth chapter will be reconciliation. Here I will present a Christian understanding of reconciliation that is both a goal and a process; both a spirituality and a strategy. The goal of this chapter is to move toward a practical theology of reconciliation. In this presentation I will create a sort of synthesis of the work of a Catholic theologian and a Christian sociologist, with concern for both theory and praxis. The creation of a synthesis from these two academic disciplines reflects my thesis project, where I was guided by AI theory and method, which comes out of the social sciences, in a process set in an ecclesial context with a desired outcome that is markedly spiritual.

In Chapter Five I will bring the preceding chapters together in a correlation in which I reflect on the narrative of Chapter Two, through the lenses of communion ecclesiology and reconciliation. In effect, in this chapter I will answer the question posed in my thesis statement: Is AI useful in promoting reconciliation in faith communities which have had their communion disrupted by conflict or some other negative event?

I will use the final conclusion chapter to summarize some of what I have learned through the thesis-project. Here I will be mostly concerned with what I think AI can offer to the praxis of reconciliation. This will include both commendations and concerns or limitations that I have seen. Also, I will outline some questions and concerns that remain unanswered, but which I hope to continue to explore as I continue working in a ministry of reconciliation.

Chapter 1

Appreciative Inquiry

“Appreciative Inquiry is based on a reverence for life and is essentially biocentric in character. It is an inquiry process that tries to apprehend the factors that give life to a living system and seeks to articulate those possibilities that lead to a better future. More than a method or technique, the appreciative mode of inquiry is a means of living with, being with, and directly participating in the life of human systems in a way that compels one to inquire into the deeper life-generating essentials and potentials of organizational existence.”⁵

David Copperrider
Positive Image, Positive Action

Shifting Paradigm

Appreciative Inquiry is a new way of viewing the world of organizations and human systems. In particular, it is a new way of thinking about organizational change and development. As such, it is best understood in contrast to the current scientific paradigm (see Table 1.1).

The prevalent theory of organizations has its roots in classical Newtonian mechanics. Newton sought to explain how bodies move in the universe and his theory constructed a model based on the assumption that the universe is like a vast machine. The image used is of a clock with many interacting parts. Each part could be isolated and thought of in terms of its mass and the forces that act upon it and cause its movement.⁶

“Newton’s work and that of his predecessors led to a scientific paradigm that has dominated our view of what is real for several centuries. Frederick Taylor’s early theories of ‘scientific management’ came out of that paradigm, applying the image of

⁵ This quote was also used in a similar way by Jane Magruder Watkins and Bernard J. Mohr in the preface of their book, *Appreciative Inquiry: Change at the Speed of Imagination*. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass/Pfeiffer, A Wiley Company, 2001), xxx.

⁶ Ibid., 4.

machine to a human system.”⁷ Margaret Wheatley describes the result of that in her work *Leadership and the New Sciences*. Because we all live and work in organizations that are designed from a Newtonian image of the universe, she writes: “We manage by separating things into parts; we believe that influence occurs as a direct result of force exerted from one person to another; we engage in complex planning for a world that we keep expecting to be predictable; and, we search continually for better methods of objectively perceiving the world.”⁸

In recent times, Newtonian physics has come under challenge by new scientific theories. Quantum physics, chaos theory, self-organizing systems and complexity theory have raised questions about the reductionism and determinism that is a part of the Newtonian model. These new sciences have as a common denominator a search for a theory of wholeness.⁹

These “new sciences” give us a radically different way of making sense of our world. The most exciting ramification for the field of organizational change/transformation is the realization that organizations as living systems do not have to look continually for which part is causing the problem or which project is not living up to some set of criteria. The “new” science embraces the magnificent complexity of our world while assuring us that built into the very fabric of the universe are processes and potentials enough to help us and all organizations move towards our highest and most desired visions.¹⁰

The theory and practice of AI has its conceptual roots in the new sciences. While in the old paradigm an organization (or world) was considered to be like a machine that could be dismantled, analyzed and put back together in a better way; the new paradigm

⁷ Ibid., 4.

⁸ Margaret Wheatley, *Leadership and the New Sciences: Learning Organization from an Orderly Universe*. (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 1994), 8.

⁹ Watkins and Mohr, *Appreciative Inquiry*, 6.

¹⁰ Ibid., 7.

presents an organization that is a living system that is constructed by the language that we use to describe it and that we experience the organization in line with the images that we hold of it.¹¹ This has particular significance for how problems are approached.

“Appreciative Inquiry would seem to suggest that by *focusing* on the deficit, we simply *create more* images of deficit and potentially overwhelm the system with images of what is ‘wrong’.”¹² The alternative approach, when faced with an organization problem or concern, is to focus on the positive. We will treat this issue in more detail below.

Arising out of this new paradigm, AI is more than a new organizational methodology, rather it “becomes a *way of seeing and being* in the world. In other words, when using the AI frame, we do not see problems and solutions as separate, but rather as a coherent whole made up of our wishes for the future and our path towards that future.”¹³

Appreciative Inquiry is rooted in the values of the emerging paradigm. In this mode, organizations create and move towards the vision of the desired future in harmony with the world view that sees the interconnectedness of all parts of the system; that accepts the complexity and subjectivity of the world; that knows that planning to be a continuous and iterative process; that embraces the concept of many truths and multiple ways to reach a goal; that understands the relational nature of the world; that believes information to be the primal creative force; and that knows language to be the creator of “reality.” In other words, the Newtonian paradigm process of dividing things into parts, believing that there is one best way of doing any action, and assuming that language describes some ultimate truth for which we all search creates a way of solving problems that looks backwards to what went “wrong” and tries to “fix” it. Appreciative Inquiry, on the other hand, looks for what is going “right” and moves towards it, understanding that in the forward movement towards the ideal the greatest value comes from embracing what works.¹⁴

¹¹ Ibid., 9.

¹² Ibid., 9.

¹³ Ibid., 10.

¹⁴ Ibid., 11.

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) Defined

Appreciative Inquiry is a collaborative and highly participative, system wide approach to seeking, identifying, and enhancing the “life-giving forces” that are present when a system is performing optimally in human, economic, and organizational terms. It is a journey during which profound knowledge of a human system at its moment of wonder is uncovered and used to co-construct the best and highest future of the system.¹⁵

I wish to highlight certain aspects of AI that are revealed within this definition.

The first is that AI must be understood as a process. As such, the definition of AI reinforces the idea that AI is a mindset or a frame of reference for looking at organizations. Methodologies and models of the AI process have been developed — an example of this will be detailed later — but the key point is that AI is a dynamic, not static, approach and that the breadth of the AI frame of reference allows for, even requires, great creativity in its application.

Secondly, it is “collaborative and highly participative.” The bias present within the approach is to engage the whole of the organization. The broader the participation, the better the process. Again, this may be best understood in contrast to the approach that is more commonly employed. In the old paradigm, activities like planning and organizational development were viewed as the responsibility of those at the top of the hierarchical structure. Typically, senior or executive management would dissect the organization and redesign structures and operations to achieve the desired change. They would then advocate for their design and defend their plan as it meets with resistance from the rank and file members of the organization. In contrast, the AI approach would

¹⁵ Ibid., 14.

call for the broadest possible participation of the stakeholders (both internal and external) of the organization to be involved in the “co-constructing” of the future.¹⁶

The DNA of Appreciative Inquiry

The essential components of the AI approach to organizational change are identified as five key principles and five generic processes. Watkins and Mohr call this the DNA of Appreciative Inquiry.¹⁷

1) The Constructionist Principle

The idea that a social system creates or determines its own reality is known as social constructionism. AI takes this theoretical framework and simply places it in a positive context. The positive spin on social constructionism is central to AI. Many of its principles flow from the idea that people control their destiny by envisioning what they want and developing actions to move towards it.¹⁸

This is an important theoretical soil for the development of AI theory and practice. A social system or organization is not fixed by nature, but is the product of a shared knowing and communication. “Knowledge about an organization and the destiny of the organization are interwoven.”¹⁹ In particular, the “reality” of an organization is determined by those who participate in the shared life, which gets expressed in the stories that they tell of the history and current life of the organization. Appreciative Inquiry is rooted in this principle in that it purports that by changing the shared narratives of the

¹⁶ The co-constructing principle will be explained in more detail in the next section.

¹⁷ Watkins and Mohr, *Appreciative Inquiry*, 37.

¹⁸ David L. Cooperrider, Diana Whitley and Jacqueline M. Stavros. *Appreciative Inquiry Handbook: The First in a Series of AI Workbooks for Leaders of Change*. (Brunswick, OH: Crown Publishing, Inc., 2005), 13.

¹⁹ Watkins and Mohr, *Appreciative Inquiry*, 37.

organization, the reality of the organization shifts.²⁰ The role of narratives is very important in the AI process. Appreciative Inquiry theory holds that by changing the narrative it is possible to co-construct a desired future. “The most important resource for generating constructive organizational change is cooperation between the imagination and the reasoning function of the mind (the capacity to unleash the imagination and the mind of the groups). AI is a way to reclaim the imaginative competence.”²¹

2) *The Principle of Simultaneity*

Here it is recognized that inquiry and change are not separate, but are simultaneous. Inquiry is intervention. The seeds of change--that is, the things people think and talk about, the things that people discover and learn, the things that inform dialogue and inspires images of the future — are implicit in the very first question we ask. The questions that we ask set the stage for what we “find,” and what we “discover” (the data) becomes the linguistic material, the stories, out of which the future is conceived, conversed about, and constructed.²²

Often people find it hard to lay aside the myth of the old paradigm which says that organizational change begins with analysis and is followed by implementing a decision about how to effect change. Instead, the theory put forth by AI states that all inquiry into a social system is fateful; that is, the inquiry itself has an effect on the organization.

This principle has two significant influences on AI theory and practice. The first is that, although AI processes get described in a sequential order, the steps in the process must be understood as being overlapping and individual actions can simultaneously be understood as being an expression of multiple steps. Secondly, if our questions are themselves fateful, then our questions take on added importance. In the old paradigm,

²⁰ This will be illustrated below in the section on the Anticipatory Principle.

²¹ Cooperrider, Whitley and Stavros, *AI Handbook*, 8.

²² Cooperrider and Whitley, “Positive Revolution,” 15.

questions are used to gather information which is then used to design the intervention. But if we recognize that the questions themselves are interventions, then the crafting of the questions to be asked takes on significant importance. Cooperrider and Whitley write:

If we accept the proposition that patterns of social-organizational action are not fixed by nature in any direct biological or physical way, that human systems are made and imagined in relational settings by human beings (socially constructed), then the attention turns to the source of our ideas, our discourses, our research--that is our questions. Alterations in linguistic practices--including the linguistic practice of crafting questions--hold profound implications for changes in social practice.²³

The importance of the questions asked will be seen in two distinct, yet related ways. The first is in solicitation of memory. The AI process is rooted in the collected memories of the organization. As will be described below, a first step in the process is to discover or remember the best of the past. It is through the questions that are asked, that the memories are solicited and directs the participants to identify the “best” of the past. The careful crafting of these questions is a key process success indicator because the memories that are solicited are the foundation for all the work to follow. Secondly, questions are important because they are used to stimulate the imagination. Imagination is needed and used to create a shared dream for the future. It is the stimulation of the imagination that energizes the participants and fuels the positive transformation of the organization. The organization is empowered and enlivened by the very process of asking carefully crafted and properly focused questions. With good questions, transformation is simultaneous with the asking of the question.

²³ Ibid., 15.

3) *The Poetic Principle*

A useful metaphor in understanding this principle is that human organizations are an open book. An organization's story is constantly being co-authored. Moreover, pasts, presents, and futures are endless sources of learning, inspiration, or interpretation (as in the endless interpretive possibilities in a good work of poetry or a biblical text).²⁴

An important implication of this principle is that because organizations are open books, we have complete flexibility in our choice of how and what we are going to study. We can study problems or we can study success stories. We can focus our inquiry on our disappointments or our hopes and dreams. How that freedom is used is key to the AI theory and practice.

The “co-authoring of the organization's story” is another way of stating the social construction principle. However, the shift in language from “constructing” to “authoring” reflects the fluidity that will be seen in the process described below. “Constructing” would seem to indicate that there is a blue print or engineering plan that needs to be followed in a structured way. While “authoring” reflects the necessary creativity or continual improvisation which is necessary in the use of an AI process, as it is tailored to the particular context in which it is being employed.

4) *The Anticipatory Principle*

The most important resource that an organization has for the co-authoring of its future is its collective imagination, which is given expression in the conversations and discussions about the future that occur within the organization. In this way, it is said that “the basic theorems of the anticipatory view of organizational life is that it is the image of

²⁴ Cooperrider, Whitley, and Stavros, *AI Handbook*, 9.

the future, which in fact guides what might be called the current behavior of any organism or organization.”²⁵

Like a movie projected onto a screen, a human system continually

projects ahead of themselves a horizon of expectation that brings the future powerfully into the present as a mobilizing agent. Organizations exist... because people who govern and maintain them share some sort of discourse or projections about what the organization is, how it will function, what it will achieve, and what it will likely become.²⁶

It is important to understand that this principle is not suggesting a magical or mystical connection between what we believe and what will occur in the future. Rather, it purports that the narratives that are told about the imagined future of the organization help to define and determine the identity (and future) of the organization because the stories that are told influences the interactions of the participants today. It is the actions of today which creates the future reality. An example that illustrates this can be found in the religious congregation which tells and re-tells the narrative of their declining membership and their congregational dying, who then live that narrative into reality as they cease to invite new members or create new opportunities for mission.

5) *The Positive Principle*

Two experienced AI practioners write:

Building and sustaining momentum for change requires large amounts of positive affect and social bonding--things like hope, excitement, inspiration, caring, camaraderie, sense of urgent purpose, and the sheer joy of creating something

²⁵ Cooperrider and Whitley, “Positive Revolution,” 16.

²⁶ Cooperrider, Whitley and Stavros, *AI Handbook*, 9. More about the power of the “inner dialogue” of the organization to shape the future is found below.

meaningful together. What we have found is that the more positive the questions that we ask in our work the more long lasting and successful the change effort.²⁷

At the core of the AI theory and approach is that a positive future is constructed on the positive core that is present today within the organization. For this reason, those elements, characteristics or events which are most positive about the organization become the sole focus of the process. This is a radical departure from the more common organizational dynamic approach of inquiring into the problem and designing a solution.

Cooperrider and Whitley write that the most important thing that their experience has taught them is that

Human systems grow in the direction of what they persistently ask questions about and this propensity is strongest and most sustainable when the means and ends of the inquiry are positively correlated. The single most prolific thing a group can do if its aim is to liberate the human spirit and consciously construct a better future is to make the positive change core the common and explicit property of all.²⁸

The unwavering focus on the positive is essential in the AI process. The rationale for that is presented in the next section and will be re-visited in the description of the AI process, which follows.

The Importance of Appreciation

When you bring together the Anticipatory Principle and the Positive Principle, you have the foundational theorem of AI; that is, positive images lead to positive action. There is solid research to support this theorem as the basis of an organizational change strategy. In his classic article, “Positive Image, Positive Action: The Affirmative Basis of

²⁷ Cooperrider and Whitley, “Positive Revolution,” 17.

²⁸ Ibid., 4.

Organizing,”²⁹ Cooperrider gives a more complete summary and cites that research, which I only briefly touch on here.

Medical research has shown that positive images, projected as a positive belief, have real healing power. Known as the placebo effect, “between one-third and two-thirds of all patients show marked physiological and emotional improvement in symptoms simply by believing in the effectiveness of the treatment, even when the treatment is just a sugar pill or some other inert substance.”³⁰ Research continues on the mind-body pathway, but what can be demonstrated is that anticipatory images lead to real results or effects. Appreciative Inquiry incorporates the placebo effect into its theory by concluding that, like for an individual human, what a human system or organization anticipates and believes about its future, will have a concrete effect on the future that will be created.

Research into educational methodology has demonstrated the Pygmalion effect. Simply, teachers were told that a selected group of students had exceptional ability. In fact, the selected students were randomly chosen and had no greater ability than the rest of the class. However, in time, the selected students did begin to outperform the rest of the class, not because of any innate superior intelligence or ability, but solely because of the expectation that had been created in the teacher. “The key lesson is that cognitive capacities are cued and shaped by the images projected through another’s expectations.”³¹ Because the teachers expected the selected students to perform better, they projected that expectation and the students responded to the positive image that the

²⁹ Cooperrider, David L. “Positive Image, Positive Action: The Affirmative Basis for Organizing,” in *Appreciative Management and Leadership: The Power of Positive Thought and Actions in Organizations*, ed. S. Srivastva and D.L. Cooperrider (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1990). 91-125

³⁰ Cooperrider, Whitley and Stavros, *AI Handbook*, 10.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 10.

teacher had of them. This reveals a relational element in the positive image-positive action pathway and it has important implications for organizational leadership and for interventions that are motivated by a desire to transform a human system.

While not yet conclusive, some recent research has pointed to the link between the positive emotions that accompany positive images, as a causal factor in the choice that a person makes to perform a positive action. “Somehow, positive emotions draw people out of themselves, pull us away from self-oriented preoccupations, enlarge the focus of the potential good of the world, increase feelings of solidarity with others, and propels them to act in more altruistic and positive ways.”³²

All human systems (and individuals) have a continual inner dialogue. Like an inner newsreel, the system is continually recounting the memories of the past and bringing various accounts of current and future scenarios into a dialogue which seeks to interpret and bring meaning to those events. That inner dialogue is influenced and expressed in the narratives (the outer dialogue) of the organization, but it is primarily an inner expression of the shared beliefs about the organization that are held by the participants and influences the unconscious choices of the participants. In that dialogue the human system brings into a dialectic both positive and negative statements and the outcome of that dialectic becomes the guiding image of the organization. Studies show that in healthy and effectively functioning organizations, there is a 2:1 ratio of positive to negative images. A mildly dysfunctional group might have an inner dialogue where the ratio of positive to negative is equal.

The AI process seeks to introduce positive images into the organization’s inner dialogue. “The AI dialogue creates guiding images of the future from the collective

³² Ibid., 11.

whole of the group. It exists in a very observable, energizing and tangible way in the living dialogue that flows through every living system, expressing itself anew at every moment.”³³ The use of questions within the process of AI is to influence the organization, by guiding the dialogue of the organization towards positive images. Simply stated, if you are able to change the dialogue, you are able to transform the organization.

Sociological research also affirms that a positive image of the future has a dynamic influence on the organization. The Dutch sociologist Fred Polak held that the single most important indicator of the health of a social system and the most important variable in understanding cultural evolution, is found by observing if the system holds a positive image of the future. Simply, “when there is a vision or a bright image of the future, the people flourish.”³⁴

Based on a wide spectrum of research, AI has emerged to challenge a long held paradigm of organizational theory. Appreciative Inquiry needs to be understood as new frame of reference which requires a new model for working with organizations and for designing and implementing strategies to assist an organization to achieve a desired transformation. I turn to that model now.

The Appreciative Inquiry Process

Watkins and Mohr write that within the practice of AI, there are five generic processes for applying the underlying theory to a framework for organizational change. They are:

³³ Ibid., 11.

³⁴ Ibid., 12.

1. Choose the positive as the focus of inquiry;
2. Inquire into stories of life-giving forces;
3. Locate themes that appear in the stories and select topics for further inquiry;
4. Create shared images for a preferred future; and
5. Find innovative ways to create that future.³⁵

These processes are called generic as a way of emphasizing their flexibility and the need to adapt them to specific situations or contexts. Part of the attractiveness of AI theory is that it supports and recognizes the uniqueness of each context and organization and practitioners are encouraged in facilitating change within an organization by adapting the practices used elsewhere. As opposed to *one* defined AI model, through the application of the principles and generic process in concrete situations, AI practitioners have developed several models which bring the generic processes to life. Through the collaboration of AI practitioners and a sharing of their work results, there has been and continues to be a progressive development in the practice of AI.

The original process model was developed in 1987 by the originators of AI theory, David Cooperrider (then a doctoral student) and Suresh Srivastva (his academic advisor). While their theoretical work began with a concern for how to approach the building of generative theory, it moved quickly into a process for intervening with groups. That original model was expressed as a contrast to the model of change management in the old paradigm (see Table 1.2). That original model was later adapted to create what has become the widely used model of AI practice, the Four-D Cycle (see Figure 1.1). While it is widely used, Cooperrider is clear that AI is more than the 4-D Cycle. “The cycle is simply a tool that allows the practitioner to access and mobilize the positive core. The positive core lies at the heart of the AI process. In this respect, the

³⁵ Watkins and Mohr, *Appreciative Inquiry*, 25.

positive core is the beginning and the end of the inquiry.”³⁶ A description of steps in the 4-D model will follow, but first we look to the important task of defining the topic of the inquiry process.

Choose the Positive as the Focus of the Inquiry

“To understand AI at a fundamental level, one needs to understand these two points. First, organizations move in the direction of what they study. Secondly, AI makes a conscious choice to study the best of the organization, its positive core.”³⁷

Because an organization will move towards that which it studies, the choice of the topic is a critical first step. Watkins and Mohr writes that the AI process begins when the organization consciously chooses to focus on the positive. Because an organization is likely to act out of the old paradigm and to unconsciously choose to focus on the negative issue or problems that they are facing, it is the work of the AI practitioner to help the organization to identify a positive focus and to make that topic choice.³⁸

“Selecting the affirmative topic choice begins with the constructive discovery and narration of the organizations ‘life-giving’ story.”³⁹ While there is great room for variability, a typical AI process would be limited to three to five topic choices. While those topics can be pre-selected by the practitioner in cooperation with the leaders of the organization, there is a strong bias that the topics be “homegrown” through a mini-AI process with a representative sub-group (topic selection team) of the organization. That process would be to *discover* what factors have given life to the organization when it was functioning at its best in the past and to begin to *dream* and *design* a vision for the future.

³⁶ Cooperrider, Whitley and Stavros, *AI Handbook*, 30.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 29.

³⁸ Watkins and Mohr, *Appreciative Inquiry*, 54.

³⁹ Cooperrider, Whitley and Stavros, *AI Handbook*, 32.

That process with the topic selection team would be built around the following foundational AI questions:

- Describe a high-point experience in your organization, a time when you were most alive and engaged.
- Without being modest, what is it that you value most about yourself, your work, and your organization?
- What are the core factors that give life to your organization, without which the organization would cease to exist?
- What three wishes do you have now to enhance the health and vitality of your organization?⁴⁰

Ideally the topic selection process would be a one-to-two day process. The goal is to work with the topic selection team, which will later become the steering team for the overall AI process, to foster dialogue and mutual deliberation. Using a mutual interview process that utilizes the questions listed above, data is collected and then in small groups the team works to identify common themes and to formulate the positive topics for the AI process. While topics can be anything related to the goals and aspirations of the organization, they must meet the following criteria:

- Topics are affirmative and stated in the positive;
- Topics are desirable. They identify the objectives that people want;
- The group is genuinely curious about them and wants to learn more;
- The topics move in the direction that the group wants to go.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Ibid., 32.

⁴¹ Ibid., 37.

Four-D Cycle⁴²

The Discovery Phase

“The primary task in the Discovery phase is to identify and appreciate the best of ‘what is.’ This task is accomplished by focusing on peak times of organizational excellence.”⁴³ Using carefully crafted questions and interview guides, the participants enter into a process of mutual interviews in which stories of organizational accomplishment are solicited and recorded. Participants need to “let go” of analysis of deficits and systematically seek to glean from these stories of past accomplishment the core life-giving factors (leadership, relationships, structures, values, core processes, etc.) which contributed to those successes.

In this phase the power of story telling gets unleashed as participants come to know their organization’s history as the foundation for positive possibilities for the future. Through positive dialogue and the celebration of past success, hope and organizational capacity for effectiveness is heightened. Participants connect to one another through a dialogue of discovery and often the seeds for a positive future begin to emerge.⁴⁴

The Discovery phase is for data collection and narrative exploration. “An important goal is to stimulate participants’ excitement and delight as they share their values, experience, and history with the organization and their wishes for the future.”⁴⁵

The process itself has several key steps. It is necessary to identify the process participants, with a bias towards very broad participation. As previously noted, the

⁴² A more complete description of the 4-D Cycle can be found in the *Appreciative Inquiry Handbook*, chapters 4-7.

⁴³ Cooperrider, Whitley and Stavros, *AI Handbook*, 38.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 39.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 86.

questions to be used in the interviews need to be crafted to solicit the positive life-giving core. A guide is often needed to assist the participants in the interviewing activity. The method for doing the interview is determined by the situation. Often this is a mutual process, done one-one in pairs of participants at a process gathering.⁴⁶ A plan also needs to be in place to collect and organize the data from those interviews. Working with the data from the interviews is part of the work of the core team and is used to continue the design and management of the AI process.⁴⁷

The Dream Phase

“The Dream (phase) amplifies the positive core and challenges the status quo by envisioning more valued and vital futures. ...The Dream phase is practical, in that it is grounded in the organization’s history. It is also generative, in that it seeks to expand the organization’s potential.”⁴⁸

The Dream phase takes the data, the narratives that were told in the Discovery phase, and “mines” them to imagine the possibilities that they contain for the future. Here the participants dialogue about the potential of the organization to achieve greatness in the future by building on its rich history. Ordinarily, this dreaming generates its own energy and enthusiasm in the participants and the sharing of dreams and generation of excitement is the first goal of the Dream phase. The second goal is to begin to identify the common themes that are present within the dreams. The necessary stance for the process remains appreciation, not analysis and judgment. The dialogue is not to identify

⁴⁶ Other methods for doing the interviews are possible.

⁴⁷ Cooperrider, Whitley and Stavros, *AI Handbook*, 87-99.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 39.

the ideal dream for the future, but to continue the process of mutual discovery of the life-giving forces that contribute to the organization's success.

While the context and number of participants are determining factors, most of the work in this phase is done in small (<12) groups. Keeping together the two person teams used in the mutual interviews of the Discovery phase, they are grouped with others to form "dream teams." It is here that the "dream dialogue" occurs and common themes are identified. They create a shared picture or dream of the future, which they creatively (skit, story, picture, mock newspaper report, mock panel presentation, etc.) present to the whole group of participants.⁴⁹

The Design Phase

While the Dream phase was involved with creating a macro-vision of the organization, in the Design phase the move is towards a more micro level of imaginative possibility. "The Design phase involves the creation of the organization's social architecture. This new social architecture is embedded in the organization by generating **provocative propositions** that embody the organizational dreams in the ongoing activity."⁵⁰

An underlying step in the Design phase is to determine the elements that are going to be present in the social architecture of the organization. Examples of these elements are: leadership or management style, roles and relationships, organizational values, vision and purpose, operating processes, etc. The simple question that guides this phase is: What has to be in place for the organization to realize its dream?

⁴⁹ Ibid., 112-116.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 40.

“The Design phase defines the basic structures that will allow the dream (or vision) to become a reality. Like the other phases, the Design phase requires widespread dialogue about the nature of the structures and process. This is what is meant by co-constructing the organization’s future.”⁵¹ For this phase of the AI process, participants are invited work in self-selecting groups. Work group or design teams are formed around the dreams which have been articulated, which in turn reflect the topics of the AI process. The freedom given to the participants to choose their area of interest ensures that energy is maintained within the work groups and contributes to the transition to the next phase.

This phase is “driven” by the writing of provocative propositions or possibility statements. The design teams may begin with participants writing individual statements, but the goal is to arrive at shared statements. Always articulated in the present tense, these statements present a vision for the future by painting a picture of what the organization looks like when its positive core is being expressed in all aspects of the organization.⁵²

A good provocative proposition stretches and challenges the organization, yet remains in the realm of real possibility. It points the direction for the organization to move from the best of “what is” to the best of what “might be.” They represented the desired future of the organization, which is stated in bold, affirmative terms.

⁵¹ Ibid., 143.

⁵² Ibid., 142.

The Destiny Phase

The Destiny phase takes the dreams for the future, which have been expressed and designed through the provocative proposition, and makes them a reality as the participants are “invited to align his or her own interactions in co-creating the future.”⁵³

The Design and Destiny phase are significantly intertwined. In an open-space planning and commitment session, the Design teams present their provocative statements or vision for the future and ask for the support of those gathered. Individuals and groups discuss what they can and will do to contribute to the realization of the organizational dreams, which are presented in those provocative propositions. This creates a relational web of commitments that are the basis for future action. These self-selecting groups then plan the next steps for creating the social architecture required to sustain the institutionalization of the desired design.⁵⁴

This (destiny) phase is ongoing. In the best case, it is full of continuing dialogue; revisited and updated discussions and provocative propositions; additional interviewing sessions, especially with new members of the organization; and a high level of innovation and continued learning about what it means to create an organization that is socially constructed through the poetic processes in a positive frame that makes full use of people’s anticipatory images.”⁵⁵

The successful AI process results in a transformed organization. It creates an organization that has developed the competencies to sustain appreciative organizing. They are continually appreciating the best of their actions. They are willing to be self-challenging to achieve even greater life-giving possibilities. They have developed the ability to dialogue and collaborate in a manner that allows them to continue to co-create a

⁵³ Ibid., 41.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 41, 176.

⁵⁵ Watkins and Mohr, *Appreciative Inquiry*, 45.

desired future and to continually be the author of the book of their organization. In short, they have become appreciative learning cultures that function in the new paradigm in accord with AI principles and practices.⁵⁶

Before I move on I want to add one final note on the AI process. The 4-D model has become one of the standard approaches for using the AI process. However, Watkins and Mohr have modified the approach to include a preliminary or initial phase. They have created a 5-D model by including a Definition phase. It is during the Definition phase that “the goals of the process, including the framing of the questions and the inquiry protocol, the participation strategy and the project management structure are developed.”⁵⁷ I think that it is a significant modification in that it embodies two key AI concepts: All questions asked are fateful, in that they have an effect on the organization and the intervention begins (simultaneity) with the first question asked. Because of this, I think that my project began with the first conversation that I had with the pastor of the parish and the narrative in the next chapter will reflect this 5-D model.

Appreciative Inquiry and Responding to Perceived Negative Events

As people first learn about AI theory and practice, they often question if AI can adequately respond to problems or negative events. The concern is that by choosing to always focus on that which is positive or life-giving, problems will not be addressed because the AI process “sugar coats reality” and fails to tell the truth of the adverse situation. This is especially a concern when there is perceived injustice within the human system or organization.

⁵⁶ Cooperrider, Whitley and Stavros, *AI Handbook*, 181. For a more complete account of appreciative organizing competencies see: Frank Barrett, “Creating Appreciative Learning Cultures,” *Organizational Dynamics* 24, no. 1 (1995):36-45.

⁵⁷ Watkins and Mohr, *Appreciative Inquiry*, 25.

To such concerns, Watkins and Mohr respond:

AI can be used to solve problems; it just approaches problem solving with a different perspective. Traditional problem solving looks for what is wrong and “fixes” it, thereby returning the situation to the status quo. Appreciative Inquiry solves problems by seeking what is going *right* and building on it, thereby going beyond the original “normal” baseline.⁵⁸

Problem-solving strategies arise out of the assumptions inherent within the paradigm that you use to understand organizations and human systems. In the old paradigm that views organizations as finite systems, problems “need to be tackled” and injustice has to be confronted with the truth of justice, usually through an accusation of wrongdoing. If you hold to the theory that organizations are socially constructed, then the problem solving strategy changes as you recognize “that both problems and resolutions are social constructions, created by our dialogue and generalized into social norms and beliefs. In this situation (using AI), resolution is generalized throughout the system and builds in the potential to move continuously towards our highest image of ourselves and our systems.”⁵⁹

In their book, Watkins and Mohr provide a case study of the AI process that was led with Avon Mexico. Avon Mexico wanted to respond to concerns of gender inequality. Instead of using a problem solving approach which might have confronted the injustice of sexism that was inherent in the system, they began an AI process with the positive focus of: Valuing Gender Diversity. The process used the 4-D model and it transformed the organization, making it not only more profitable but also a national award-winning organization for having policies and practices that benefit women in the

⁵⁸ Ibid., 195.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 197.

corporation. By recognizing that in every human system there are positive aspects which can be discovered and which can become the foundation on which the dream of a more desired organization can be built, problems are addressed.⁶⁰

I would liken the AI approach to problem-solving to the use of a lever to lift an object. When faced with the problem of lifting a 500 pound rock, you can try to get your arms around it and (unsuccessfully) try to raise it up; or you can place a fulcrum and use a lever and lift the rock by pushing down on the lever. Just as focusing our efforts on the lever will accomplish the desired effect on the rock, by focusing on the positive and the life-giving aspects that are present within the organization, AI addresses the negative situation or problem.

In summary, AI responds to problems by approaching the problem from the “side” of the solution; by transforming the organization into the organization that it dreams it can be (without the negative situation or problem). Even in the most egregious inequitable situations, the “solutions” are embedded within the organization and they can be discovered through an Appreciative Inquiry of the positive life-giving forces that are present.⁶¹

Within the AI framework, effective leaders must have the necessary appreciative competencies to assist the organization to be an appreciative learning organization. Appreciative Inquiry is not just a change management tool. It is a mind set; a way for people to understand their organization; an orientation that guides human interaction within human systems. A primary task of effective leadership is to assist the organization to function within that framework. This requires participative management and a spirit of

⁶⁰ Ibid., 123-126.

⁶¹ Ibid., 198.

collaboration where all in the organization can participate in the dialogue which constructs an effective organization.

In organizations that are experiencing a negative situation, effective leadership is critical. In negative situations, an important leadership task is to manage the dialogue within the organization. Inquiry into the negative aspects of an organization must be done in a way that solicits positive data which can assist in the transformation of the organization. Again, the case study of Avon Mexico is illustrative. When faced with concerns about gender inequality, the initial task was to shift the focus to the positive or desired alternative – valuing gender diversity. Instead of leadership searching for examples of inequality and assigning blame and demanding accountability, the AI process began with the discovery of the opposite: tell a story of when you have seen women and men working together effectively here at Avon Mexico. Those positive images were the foundation of their successful transformation into a organization that valued gender diversity.

While the case of Avon Mexico is an AI intervention, it reflects the same AI pathway that effective AI leaders will use in responding to conflicts or negative situations within their organization. The task is not to deny or “white wash” problems as they are identified. It is not a Pollyanna approach that censors truth telling. Rather, rooted in a conviction that positive actions only flow out of positive images, a leader responds to a negative situation by inquiring: Yes, that negative situation exists; so what is the positive alternative that we desire? An effective leader responds by saying: What is our dream of being a better organization and what can we discover in our history to build that dream upon? How can we design and live that dream of an organization into reality? Effective

leaders do not deny negative situations. Rather, with an AI orientation, leaders transform negatives into positives.

Chapter Two

A Community's Journey of Reconciliation: Walking in Faith and Moving Forward with Christ

Like all stories of ministry, this one begins with the recognition of a pastoral need and a desire to respond. The story of the sexual abuse of children by the pastor at St. Agatha Catholic Church had been prominently reported. As a chapter in this larger issue within the Roman Catholic Church, this story had a particular poignancy because it was a story of recent abuse and the failure of the Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People to offer the protection that it promised.⁶²

The *Chicago Tribune* has told the story through dozens of articles since the initial report of allegations against Fr. Daniel McCormack (January 22, 2006). However, it was an article on the appointment of a new pastor that prompted my involvement. Fr. Larry Dowling was appointed pastor in February 2007. He succeeded an interim pastor who had served the church following the removal of Fr. McCormack in January 2006. In that article, Fr. Dowling is quoted as saying:

Now what is the task here? It's to bring healing. It's to continue to build on the good things here because there is still a wonderful core group of people here who have really stuck it out and want to see things continue to happen and continue to grow here. So, I want to help make that happen. Some people say, We're ready to move on. I also think that some people are still struggling with the 'whys' and the 'hows' did this happen. And that I have to sort out with them.⁶³

⁶² "The Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People" came out of the United States Catholic Conference of Bishops' meeting in Dallas, 2005. It has been widely distributed and is available at <http://www.usccb.org/ocyp/charter.shtml>.

⁶³ Margaret Ramirez, "New Pastor Aims to Heal Wounded Congregation," *Chicago Tribune*, February 22, 2007, News Section.

Sexual abuse by a pastor has tragic effects on the young lives of the victims. The betrayal of trust also victimizes the entire faith community. While I share with all Catholics a concern for the children and young people who are victimized and recognize the critical need for their pastoral care and our responsibility as a Church to provide that care, it is the effects of that betrayal on the faith community that has been a focus of my personal pastoral concern. In Fr. Dowling's words, I heard a similar concern as he began as pastor of that wounded church. I also heard in him a desire to assist the church to move forward by building upon the good things present in the church, a pastoral approach that was consistent with the change theory of AI . The article identified for me a need for a ministry of reconciliation and the potential opportunity of testing the use of a process of AI as a pastoral approach to facilitate the healing of a fractured community.

Fr. Dowling was receptive to my call and request to meet with him. While I did not know him, in our initial meeting I discovered that he knew of me and the Precious Blood Ministry of Reconciliation through my work with the Archdiocese of Chicago Office of Conciliation. I was a member of the Advisory Board for that office and in that capacity, I had made a presentation to a group in which he was present.

Our initial meeting lasted over an hour and served multiple purposes. First, it was an opportunity for me to present myself and to express my pastoral concern for reconciliation within faith communities. I was able to briefly describe AI theory and my desire to test its applicability for promoting reconciliation and healing in communities. I was clear in presenting my offer of involvement as also benefiting myself in providing a project which would be presented in this paper. While I had an academic concern, I

assured him that my academic concern would always be subjugated to the pastoral need of the parish.

Second, it was an opportunity to hear from him first hand about his experience of coming to St. Agatha and his observations and hopes for the parish. He spoke fondly of the parishioners and with admiration for the depth of faith that he was witnessing in the community. He also spoke of the effect of the abuse allegations and the difficulty that followed in the parish. He said that many parishioners had left the church and that the 2006 “October count”⁶⁴ was down about 45% from 2005. Some parishioners felt that they were living under a stigma, with neighbors asking them why they were going to “that” Church. While many parishioners were angry with Fr. McCormack and the Archdiocese of Chicago, others were still believing that Fr. McCormack was innocent. He reported that while there were pockets of continuing discussion of the case, attempts to discuss the incident in the parish council were met with reluctance and their expression of a desire to move forward.

Third, in this initial meeting I also spoke of the elements of a generic AI process.⁶⁵ An underlying question in the design of the process has been the question of the amount of time which is required for an effective process. I wanted to be clear that this was not a one-shot, quick fix approach and that to move forward was to make a significant commitment. I stressed the importance of trying to create the broadest possible participation and the important role of a core team to design and lead the process. My role was to be one of consultation and facilitation.

⁶⁴ It is a Roman Catholic Church practice to count the total number of worshipers at all the Masses celebrated during the month of October.

⁶⁵ See Chapter 1, p. 21 for a detailed description of the generic process.

Fr. Dowling was enthusiastic in his responses throughout this initial meeting and was supportive of going forward with the project. However, with the wisdom of an experienced pastor, he deferred a decision on this to the parish council.

I met with the St. Agatha Parish Council on May 8. The meeting was disappointing in that only about one half of the council members were present. However, I presented myself and my hope for being a part of an AI process at St. Agatha, covering much of the same ground as in the initial meeting with Fr. Dowling. I briefly explained AI theory and the generic AI process, using a handout.⁶⁶

Like the initial meeting with Fr. Dowling, there was an element to this meeting of “selling” the idea of the parish using an AI process. To that end, I began to “translate” the ideas and concepts of AI theory into the language of the Church. While the origination and development of AI is found in the secular social science of organizational dynamics, it has been successfully utilized in many different types of organizations, including ecclesial organizations. I decided that translating the theory into the language of the Church would make the theory more accessible to Church people. To that end, I began to speak about the process as Appreciative Discernment and the main point of translation is found in the questions used to explain the 4-D process. For example, some guiding questions for the Discovery phase are: What gives life to the organization? What is the best of what is? Within a church framework of Appreciative Discernment, the guiding questions might be expressed as: How has God blessed us and been faithful to us? Where do we experience the grace and blessing of God? I believe that this sort of translation was beneficial in explaining the process and demonstrating its appropriateness for use in an ecclesial setting.

⁶⁶ This handout is found in Chapter 2---Appendix 1.

Those members of the parish council present were supportive of the possibility of my accompanying the parish through this process, but they delayed a decision because they wanted broader participation in that decision. It was decided that I would meet with a group of parish leaders to make my proposal. That meeting was scheduled for early June, but was postponed until July 17.

A number of factors contributed to that delay. Most prominently was that on the day that I was scheduled to meet with the leadership group, St. Agatha was again in the news. In a Tribune article that day it was announced that the contract of the school principal was not being renewed. She had been the principal at the time the abuse occurred. In the article, the principal linked the decision to terminate her employment to her being critical of the Archdiocese's handling of the abuse allegations. The Archdiocese spokesperson denied the connection and said that the decision was based on the "current pastor's evaluation of her performance" and not related to past events.⁶⁷ Exacerbating the situation was that the decision was also featured prominently on local news telecasts. Regardless of the reason for the decision, it was another disturbance in the life of the parish and I did not think that it was reasonable to expect the leadership team to focus on my proposal as this new event was unfolding. In fact, the parish leaders did meet that evening to discuss the current situation.

The issue of the principal's termination illustrates an important fact concerning the context of this project. The event that has disrupted the harmony of the parish continues. Another instance of this disruption occurred when Fr. McCormack entered a guilty plea and was sentenced to prison. In the Tribune story of the plea agreement, Fr.

⁶⁷ Mayna A. Brachear, "Charged Pastor's Principal Fired," *Chicago Tribune*, June 8, 2007, News section.

Dowling noted that the plea agreement “helps the parish move towards closure. But that it also reopens old wounds.”⁶⁸

One result of the media coverage is that it continues to “brand” St. Agatha as a place where children were abused and creates an identity for the parish that belies their faithfulness. This is particularly true because of the involvement of a victim advocacy group which effectively brings media attention to the events of McCormack’s offense and the manner in which they perceive the Archdiocese failed in their response to the allegations. The victim advocacy group also demonstrated outside the parish on September 10th, when Cardinal George was present for the installation of Fr. Dowling as pastor. While I believe that all in St. Agatha Church seek to support those abused by their former pastor, many express a resentment of the advocacy group and think that they hinder the healing needed in the parish.

Definition Phase

The purpose of the July 17th meeting with the group of parish leaders was to present the proposal of St. Agatha using an AI process. The group was invited together by the pastor and it included parish council members, representatives from the finance committee and other parish groups and some staff. There were sixteen representatives present and we met for two hours.

The starting point for the design of this session was the suggested agenda for an Executive Overview to AI found in the *Appreciative Inquiry Handbook*.⁶⁹ However, I modified the plan significantly, emphasizing the mutual interview exercise. The reason

⁶⁸ Azam Ahmed, “Priest Admits to Abuse,” *Chicago Tribune*, July 3, 2007, Metro section.

⁶⁹ David L. Cooperrider, Diana Whitley and Jacqueline M. Stavros, *Appreciative Inquiry Handbook: The First in a Series of AI Workbooks for Leaders of Change* (Brunswick, OH: Crown Publishing, Inc., 2005), 52-53.

for this is that I had a concern about the amount of time that a good AI process requires and it was still unclear to how much time the parish would be willing to commit. This reflects the difference between a voluntary member organization and an employment environment where an executive decision can make people available for the time needed to do the process. So, because I'm concerned about the time, I also wanted to use this session to collect data that would be used to design the process.

In some ways, I treated this session as the first step in working with the core team. In fact, subsequently the pastor did appoint the participants of this meeting as the core team. So, a key outcome that I desired from this meeting was to gather information that would help the core team to design the process; specifically, to help clarify the process purpose and the topics. That was successful.

Overall the meeting was enjoyable. It was apparent to me that the participants had warm relationships and cared about one other. They seemed open and forthright in their interactions and responses to questions. I began by presenting myself and AI theory.⁷⁰ There was some visible glazing over as I began with the theory and principles and some skepticism as I described the mutual interview process. But the interview process got them engaged and they were unanimous in recognizing the energy that was created. The interviews did generate information that would be used to advance the process design.⁷¹ The topic that I chose for the mutual interviews was: We're faithful, prayerful and serving an awesome God. This was a quote from Deacon Greg Shumpert, in the *Tribune* article on Fr. Dowling's appointment.⁷² I followed up the interview

⁷⁰ See Chapter 2---Appendix 2 for the handout used.

⁷¹ For this interview guide see Chapter 2---Appendix 3.

⁷² Margaret Ramirez, "New Pastor Aims to Heal Wounded Congregation," *Chicago Tribune*, February 22, 2007, News Section.

process with a description of the 4-D cycle with a hypothetical example of what that might look like at St. Agatha. They “got it” and made the commitment to go forward.

The Definition phase of an AI process is critical to its future outcome. Most essentially, because the desire is to bring about sustainable change within an organization which self-manages and is not consultant dependent, working with the core team that is composed of organizational leaders, is a time of teaching and reinforcing the principles and practices of AI so that it can be the continuing operative approach in the organization. I was very conscious of this in my work with the core leadership team of St. Agatha and I facilitated their work in a manner consistent with AI theory and practice. This also highlights the importance of the work of the core team and my relationship to that team.

It was important that the pastor and the core team accept responsibility for the AI process. My desired role was to serve them as consultant to facilitate process design and the process itself. However, time constraints had an important influence on my role. A recurring element of my work was to monitor the time demands on the core team and the parish. In this, there was a constant tension between what was ideally desired (as articulated in the literature and illustrated through the case studies presented in the literature) and what was practical in the context of a parish in which all participation is voluntary. The result was that I needed to assume responsibility for some process design elements that might have ideally been more the work of the core team, while also assuring their ownership of each step in the process. This is illustrated in the first design task, the definition of purpose and identification of topics.

Defining the process purpose and topic are critical. August 7 was the first meeting of the newly constituted core team. Before they had gathered as parish leaders to make a decision about going forward with the process; now they had accepted responsibility to be the core team. I began this session by reviewing and articulating the process in spiritual terms, as an appreciative discernment process, and I described the important role that they would play in the design and leadership of the process. I described the effective working of the core team as being **the** key success factor for the process. We then set out to define the purpose of the process. I explained that we wanted to be able to define the purpose in a six to eight word phrase that would effectively “name” the process and assist us in communicating with the whole parish. Agreement on the purpose is also foundational to the working of the core team, as process design must be determined by the purpose.

To do so, I asked the questions: What is your hope about this process? What benefit do you hope will come out of it for the parish? I then asked them to discuss these questions in groups of three persons. After a few minutes, each triad reported and I listed phrases and themes that were present in those reports. A sample of ideas that emerged are:

- strengthen the faith of the community;
- plan for evangelization;
- establish a clear mission;
- draw on the gifts of the whole parish and build on those strengths.

However, when we began to draw upon the list of themes to write a purpose statement, we encountered our first difficulty. While there was a great deal of general agreement on

our purpose and the desired outcome, we had difficulty in agreeing on the actual phrase to articulate that purpose and to name the process. After more than an hour of discussion, someone suggested that we table this issue until the next meeting as a way of giving people time to think and pray about it. So we decided to discontinue the “wordsmithing” activity and move to topic selection.

To begin this activity I explained how topic choice is a fateful act because the topic would be the focus of inquiry and dialogue; as such the parish would move in the direction of the topics we selected. I used the work of Cooperrider, Whitley and Stavros as a reference for describing the qualities of a good topic.⁷³ I also said that it is desirable to limit the scope of this process to three to five topics.

For this activity, we utilized the information gathered in the mutual interview process of the previous meeting (July 17). While it would have been desirable for the core team to review completely the data from the mutual interviews and to identify themes, instead because of the time constraints, I merely read the list of “essential elements” that they had identified from their mutual interviews and asked them to identify themes from that listing.⁷⁴ This resulted in a fruitful discussion. Some possible topics that emerged were:

- faith filled and Spirit-driven;
- building community;
- nurturing and supportive relationships.

This meeting ended without a purpose statement or topic selection.

⁷³ See Chapter 1, p 25 for this.

⁷⁴ Refer to Chapter 2---Appendix 3, question #4 for clarification of the essential elements list.

Two weeks later the core team reconvened to continue the task of defining the purpose and topic selection and to begin our discussion of the process activity. I had done much preparatory work with the hope of arriving at a decision on purpose and topics. I began by outlining the tasks for the evening and saying that we needed to continue the important task of defining our process purpose and selecting topics. I also suggested that we define consensus as: arriving at a decision that everyone was “OK with and could actively support.” This seemed to help the group in the work that followed. Next, I explained that I had used my notes from our previous discussion and had drafted ten possible purpose statements, which I then read to them. With that listing in mind, we began to “mix and match” phrases and elements of the different statements and drafted a half dozen other possibilities. After much discussion, we arrived at consensus on this purpose statement: **Walking by faith and moving forward with Christ.**

In the end, it was the journey motif that seemed to capture the imagination of the participants and it was very important to them that the process be clearly identified as a faith activity; what we were going to be doing was the work of committed disciples discerning their call to faithfulness. In the weeks ahead this purpose statement served the process well in that it became a constant reminder of the reason for the work and it was frequently incorporated into the inner dialogue of the parish through the conversations of parishioners and the worship of the parish.

We re-engaged the discussion of selecting the topics that we would inquire about. Again, I hoped to facilitate arriving at a consensus by drafting some suggested topics, from a synthesis of our previous work. The topics that I suggested were:

1. A vibrant and spirit-filled church.

2. We are one: united and strengthened in Christ.
3. Being Church, After Church.

Initially, there was little reaction to my suggestion, positive or negative. The discussion seemed to lack energy. My concern was that I was over-influencing the process design and that I was determining the topics for the process at the expense of allowing the team to truly control the direction of the inquiry. I expressed my concern about this and a team member responded by saying that to her the topics seemed obvious and that there was no need to comment. Others quickly agreed and all expressed that these were topics that they would like to see be the focus of the process.

The topics reflected three basic or typical elements in the life of any parish. In the work to follow, the first presented an opportunity to inquire about the worship practice of the parish. The second was specific to the life of the community that was expressed in their relationships with each other. I was particularly pleased to see this topic selected as it ties directly to my investigation of the value of using an AI process for the restoration of communion in a community that has had their sense of well being disrupted by conflict or other disturbance. The third topic became an inquiry into the mission or ministerial activity of the parish, focused outside of its own worship and community identity. The phrase used to express the topic, “Being Church, After Church”, has the additional value in that it is a long-standing slogan used in the parish and has been incorporated into their worship dismissal rite.

With the purpose defined and topics selected, the last task of the evening was given over to my outlining the overall process. I spoke of my concern about the time commitment that would be needed, but said that I thought that we needed to commit

minimally to three afternoon sessions. In general terms, I defined the purpose of each of those sessions, referring to the 4-D process that would serve as a framework for process design. Stating the importance of “whole system” involvement, I asked them if they thought that we could get a broad cross section of the parish to make such a time commitment to the process. They were thoughtful and serious as they considered and discussed the question, and they decided that a three session process would be possible. We established a schedule for the process and, at my suggestion, split the core team into two groups: one would be responsible for the practical details of the process and the other would work with me in process design and session leadership. The team members chose their area of work and we set dates for future meetings.

A subsequent meeting with the part of the core team dedicated to the practical concerns was fairly short and to the point. The main focus of the meeting was to look at ways to facilitate whole system involvement. All agreed that broad and active participation would be best achieved through direct, personal invitation. Who to invite became a topic of discussion. I asked them to identify the “stakeholders” of St. Agatha, which was a term that required explanation. I suggested that we consider inviting anyone that we thought had an interest in the welfare of the parish. Of course, that would be active parishioners, but I also inquired about inviting inactive and former members; non parishioners who receive service from the parish ministries; neighborhood representatives; Archdiocesan representatives; etc.

While Fr. Larry was enthusiastic about the possibility of an expanded invitation list, in the end, the task of inviting the active parishioners seemed to be the focus of the

effort.⁷⁵ They thought that through telephone invitations it would be possible to get 100-150 people to participate. I thought that this number was optimistic because that would equal the number of worshipers present on the two times that I had attended the 10:30 Sunday Liturgy.

This team also decided that youth, age 14 and older, would be invited to participate fully; babysitting would be provided for those younger; lunch would be catered; we would use name tags; and a variety of other practical and important details.

The subsequent meeting with the part of the core team focused on the process was equally effective. The purpose of this meeting was to define the first session and the materials that would be needed. The majority of the time was spent going through the interview guide to be used.⁷⁶

While the interview guide was reviewed and slightly modified during this meeting, the final draft was basically what I had presented. In that, we diverged from a more recommended process development theory which suggest that this activity is preferably part of the core team's responsibility. Perhaps a better interview guide would have been developed through the collaborative writing by the core team, but the time needed for that would have been extensive.

While the core team never balked at any request that I made on their time, attendance by individual core team members fluctuated. In this situation, that is perfectly reasonable. The practice of AI, as described in the literature, is labor intensive. In this project I needed to make decisions regularly as to how to minimize the time demand without minimizing the effectiveness of the process. Often the decision that I made was

⁷⁵ The call list used was a Fall 2006 list of registered and active parishioners.

⁷⁶ This interview guide is found in Chapter2---Appendix 4.

to accept more responsibility for the process design tasks, with the hope that it did not undermine the needed commitment and investment of the core team in the process.

Another meeting of the full core team was held the week prior to the first session. This meeting was to review again the plan for the session and to continue to animate the team members to make the calls to invite participants and to build interest in the session through their invitation of the parishioners.

Discovery Phase

The first session with the parish was on Sunday, September 16, 2007. It was a beautiful sunny day and the presence of approximate 90 parishioners represented a significant level of participation. The participants were almost entirely from the roster of current active parishioners. I think it demonstrates the effectiveness of the work of the core team to individually invite people to participate and the work of building anticipation for the process through church bulletin announcements and the pastor speaking to the importance of the process on previous Sundays. The demographics (age, gender, etc) of the participants appeared to reflect the parish; more women than men, but a significant number of men; more elderly than youth, but there was also participation of teens and young adults.⁷⁷

While the work of the session was from 1:00-4:00, in effect the session began with the celebration of Eucharist at 10:30. This is the “main” liturgy of the parish, with the largest number of congregants and is the most spirited worship service because of the presence of the gospel choir. Following the liturgy, a simple lunch was shared by those

⁷⁷ Some reflections on the possible effects of the process if we had been able to include non-active parishioner, will be included in Chapter 5.

staying to participate in the work session. All the activities (Mass, lunch and the work session) were held in the same space (parish hall).

The framing of the work session in this way had two significant effects and it was a pattern that we followed in subsequent sessions. First, it clearly situated the process as a spiritual or faith activity; this was an activity of a church exploring their faithfulness. Secondly, the sharing of lunch provided positive affect which carried the group into the process.

Each Sunday, the homily made specific reference to the process and encouraged the participation of the congregation. I believe that this served as a public endorsement of the process by the pastor and deacon and added to the legitimacy of the process. This Eucharist is always a spirited event, which is a source of pride to the parishioners; it also built positive energy and affect which carried over into the “business” of the session.

It was a decision of the core team that the work sessions be designed to emphasize that this was not “just” a planning process, but the church actively engaged in a spiritual process of discernment. To that end, we began each session with prayer, which flowed into the work of the session and was brought to conclusion in prayer. Prayer was also incorporated into the process.

The first session was focused on the Discovery activity of the AI process. The presented goal for the session was: **How has God blessed us? Discovering what gives life to St. Agatha Catholic Church.**⁷⁸

The pastor, Fr. Larry Dowling, initiated the work session with some preliminary comments of welcome and a description of how and why the decision had been made to

⁷⁸ See Chapter 2- Appendix 5 for an outline of the session. This outline was not distributed, but used by the core team.

convene for this process. In those remarks he also introduced me and explained how I came to be involved and that my involvement was part of my academic program and a pastoral concern which flowed out of my religious identity as a member of the Missionaries of the Precious Blood and our spirituality and charism of reconciliation.

The session then began with a prayer service. This simple and familiar pattern of prayer (Song, Gathering Prayer, Scripture passage and Reflection) was used for each session. While Fr. Larry planned the service, the choice of Scripture flowed out of the discussion of the core team in our preparation. For this session the Scripture passage used was the story of the disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24: 13-35). In his reflections on the scripture passage he did an excellent job of connecting the journey motif expressed in the purpose statement: Walking in faith and moving forward with Christ. He also fulfilled my request that he share his personal hopes and dreams for the parish, which he believed would flow from the work that they would do together. By design, he left his reflection open ended and allowed me to continue it.

The purpose of my comments was to briefly introduce AI and to give an overview of the process that we would be following. My goal with these comments was not to present a complete overview of AI, but to reassure the participants that the journey we were undertaking did have a road map and that what we were going to do this day fit into an overall plan. I used the Appreciative Discernment framework to describe the overall plan and I articulated the process purpose and the topics that we would be exploring. In my description of AI, I emphasized two points:

1. The social construction principle with its inherent promise that any future that we can imagine, we can create.

2. That an organization would move towards that which it most consistently talks about so we were going to talk about the positives of St. Agatha, not the negatives.

The heart of this session was a mutual interview process. The first step in this was to have the participants pair up. I did this in a simple way, by asking all to stand and to find someone in the room that they did not know very well and who was different than themselves. When they found a partner I asked them to join hands and raise them so that I could know that all had a partner. This instruction was met with some looks that said: What have I gotten myself into? But the participants followed the instructions and the pairings were relatively diverse in age and gender.

I had the pairs find a seat together and we distributed the interview guides and the interview summary sheets.⁷⁹ I then gave some instructions for conducting the interviews. I began by reading the preface to the questions, with some comments to emphasize the importance of narratives as holders of truth and as containing the power to inspire. I told them that they would each have a turn as interviewer and interviewee. Then, specific to the activity, I invited them as interviewers to be curious; to use the interview guides and to make notes on it as they did the interview, but I emphasized their task was to help their partner to tell their stories. After conducting the interview, they were to use their notes and fill out the interview summary sheet. I invited them as interviewees to use this as an opportunity to give witness to the way God has blessed them and, especially with the dreaming questions, to free up their creativity. I asked them to give themselves permission to dream with audacious hope; to be like a little child who hasn't yet acquired

⁷⁹ Guidance for the development of the interview guide was found in Cooperrider, Whitley and Stavros, *AI Handbook*, 88-92. The Interview guide can be found in Chapter 2---Appendix 4 and the interview summary sheet is found in Chapter Two---Appendix 6.

that inner adult voice that says: That will never happen. For the process I suggested they “be like a four year old who ‘still’ believes that anything is possible with God,” a phrase that made many of them smile. Most of all, I invited them to have fun with the interview and not to get “hung up” on any particular question. At the very least, this was a chance to come to know a fellow parishioner better.

Each interview was conducted in about 45 minutes, with a short break in between the two interviews. During this time I circulated among the group answering questions and clarifying the activity, where needed. The interaction that I witnessed was personal and focused. A later review of the interview guides suggested that they were well constructed to elicit stories and most of the guides had notations from the interview. The summary sheets also were used effectively, although some were more detailed than others and some were not used.

We ended the session with a small group process that was designed to carry the group into the next session. As I circulated during the interviews, I gave each pair a number, which assigned them to a small group. We formed nine groups of ten persons each. I had the participants gather in their assigned small groups and to arrange their chairs into a circle. I then gave instructions for their group activity. My emphasis was placed on the fact that the groups that we were forming were the small groups that they would work with in the next session; in effect, they were being formed to become “dream teams.” Group leaders had been previously selected from the core team and they had been prepared to lead this activity.

The group leaders introduced themselves and led the Prayer to Consecrate a Sacred Space.⁸⁰ Praying together and performing this simple ritual (people sign themselves on the forehead, lips, ears and heart) was designed and included in this activity to emphasize the spiritual and communal nature of the process and to forge a connection among the small group members. Group members were then asked to introduce their interview partner, using their notes from the interview guide. After all had been introduced, the group leader led them in a discussion to choose a name for their group. And as a last step, the group leader collected names and contact information for their group. They made two copies of the list; one that they kept so that they could contact their team members before the next session and encourage them to be present at the second session and the other was collected by me to be a record of participation and to assist the parish in any follow-up activity that might be determined.

The names for the groups were mostly religious in nature. For example, the Miracle Workers and the Twelve Disciples were two of the names. The reason for the naming exercise was to strengthen the bond among the group with the belief that the stronger their sense of connection to the group and the work that the group would be doing, the more likely they would return for the second session. It seemed to have that effect with some friendly comments between the participants about who had chosen the best name.

I wrapped up the session by summarizing briefly what we had done and describing the Dream phase which would be the focus of the process the following Sunday. The session was then concluded by Fr. Larry with his thanks and with a very brief dismissal rite and blessing, similar to the conclusion of Mass.

⁸⁰ See Chapter Two---Appendix 7.

Throughout the session, the engagement of the participants was evident. They maintained eye contact, looked interested and readily followed the directions that were given. At the session ended I felt good about the start of the process and about the likelihood that the level of participation would continue into the work to come.

After the session, I met briefly with the small group leaders to collect a copy of the participant lists and to remind them that we had a core team meeting on Tuesday to process the data and to prepare for the next week's session. To that end, I asked them to review the interview guides and summary sheets and to identify themes that were present. I also asked them to begin to imagine how the individual dreams of their team members might be woven into a collective team dream.

Session One---Valuation

The core team met on the Tuesday evening after each session for the purpose of appreciating the previous session and planning for the next. Watkins and Mohr refer to the appreciative approach of evaluation as “valuation.”⁸¹ In this biocentric or life-affirming approach, which is consistent with the underlying principles of AI, only the positive is given attention. In a traditional evaluation approach I might have asked: What did we do well and what could we have done better? However, with the core team my questions were: What did we really do well? What do we want to be sure to do again next week? Was there a life giving moment in the process for you? This valuation approach was new to the core team, but they did respond to my inquiries. While not

⁸¹ Jane Magruder Watkins and Bernard J. Mohr, *Appreciative Inquiry: Change at the Speed of Imagination*. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass/Pfeiffer, A Wiley Company, 2001), 56.

quantifiable, it seemed to me that the team became more comfortable with this approach over the next two uses.

In response to the valuation questions they reported that they were pleased with the attendance and the depth of participation that they witnessed. They valued the way the process was facilitated and thought that aided the group to work effectively. They affirmed the decision to frame the process in spiritual terms, saying that the beginning prayer allowed them to enter the process through familiar territory. All thought there was great energy in the room and many were impressed by the way the parishioners embraced the process, particularly the instruction to pair up with someone unlike themselves; several people expressed surprise at some of the pairings that they saw. Time seemed to go quickly and they appreciated how the interviews helped people to be open to each other. Several identified as life giving moments the opportunity to hear the faith story of another which inspired them and buoyed their spirit. The story telling also energized people.

Following the valuation process we began to prepare for the next session by doing the human knot exercise. In the human knot exercise everyone stands together in a tight huddle and reaches across the group and joins hands with two other people. The result is a human knot. Then, without releasing each other's hands, they are instructed to untangle. It is a fun exercise and is usually full of laughter, but it does demonstrate a serious principle: With cooperation, perseverance and a little humor, the knotty problems that make being together difficult can be untangled. An untangled human knot forms a circle.

The reason for doing the exercise this evening was to teach that principle, but more, it was to test the exercise as a way of beginning the dream team exercise in the next session. The core team agreed that it would be fun to do and would likely have the same effect as it had with them, which was to invigorate them. The one caution was that some of the elderly participants might be enlisted as coaches for the exercise and not included in the exercise directly.

Following that exercise I reviewed with the small group leaders from the first session the themes and life giving elements that had been identified in the interviews. Together, they generated a list of twenty that included traits such as:

- perseverance;
- Church is family;
- care for our children;
- openness to change;
- seriousness about faith.

I explained that these “gifts” would be posted around the hall to serve as visible stimulation for the dreaming activity of the next session. I then spent time going through the plan and their role in the second session. While I did that, Fr. Larry met with the others to address practical issues for the session.

Dream Phase

The second session of the AI process at St. Agatha was on Sunday, September 24, 2007. The guiding theme for the day was articulated as: **Dreaming: What awesome future is possible with the grace of God? Discerning the invitation and call of God.**

It was again a beautiful day, both sunny and warm. The celebration of the Eucharist was spirited and well attended. In his homily and in his other comments, Fr. Larry referenced the afternoon session and encouraged participation. Following the lunch, about 75 persons stayed to participate. Of these, about 6-8 had not been a part of the first session. Around the parish hall, which is also used for liturgy, the various “gifts” that had been identified by the core team in their review of the data from the first session, had been printed on individual sheets of paper and posted.⁸²

The work session began with prayer (same pattern of prayer used in the first session) led by the pastor. The scriptural text chosen was, I Corinthians 12:4-11. In his reflection, Fr. Larry made the connection of the Pauline text on the variety and unity of gifts with the listing of gifts that was up on the walls. He left his reflection open ended for me to continue.

In my remarks, I recapped the previous session, noting that it had been an opportunity to hear the witness of another and to discover the ways in which God has and continues to be present in the church. I also read off a sampling of the gifts that had been posted and referred to them as a rock or secure foundation on which to construct a church.

I then described the task of the session. I briefly touched on themes that would support the work to be done. I spoke of the power of images to draw us into a positive future and that in talking about our dreams we were already beginning the journey to making them our reality. I reminded them that, as a Church, our inner dialogue professes the belief that God keeps the promise made by Jesus that the Spirit will be with us always to guide us and that God has the power to change death to life. No death is final; no

⁸² The outline for this session is found in Chapter 2---Appendix 8.

problem is beyond the healing of God. Finally, I encouraged them to free up their creativity and to dream big dreams. For this I first recalled the quote from Daniel Burnham: “Make no little plans; they have no magic to stir men’s (people’s) blood.”⁸³ Then I asked them: What is the dream that can stir our blood? What is a dream that we can give our lives to and is worthy of the gifts that God has given us?

Finally, I invited them to allow their inner four year old to come out and play and in groups of 15-20, we did the human knot exercise. It generated a lot of energy. Some were reluctant to participate, but mostly people entered into the play. One group was unable to untangle in the time allotted and that too was positive in that it led to a lot of good natured teasing. Generally, it seemed to have the desired effect of generating energy, opening up people to a creative exercise and showed the success of hanging on to each other through difficult times and persevering in working together.

The “dream teams” then formed small circles where their group name had been posted, along with extra news sheets. Participants who had not been present for the team formation exercise of the previous session were incorporated into the existing groups. This allowed the groups which were smaller because of the absence of members to be supplemented. The task of this process was to explore the individual dreams of the participants and to develop a dream shared by the group.⁸⁴

The high energy from the human knot exercise carried into the group work. As I circulated among the groups, there was focused interaction, led by the core team members, as the individual dreams were recalled and developed. The process design was

⁸³ This quotation was found at: http://www3.thinkexist.com/quotes/Daniel_H._Burnham/

⁸⁴ The inspiration for this process was the Creative Dreaming exercise in James D. Ludema and others, *The Appreciative Inquiry Summit: A Practitioner’s Guide for Leading Large-Group Change*. (San Francisco: Berrett-Kohler Publishers, Inc., 2003), 152-159. The process is detailed in Chapter 2---Appendix 9.

for common elements to be identified and recorded on newsprint during the sharing of the individual dream narratives so they could be used in the creation of the common dream narrative. Once all the dreams from the mutual interviews had been shared, those participants not present at the last session were given an opportunity to share their dream. The dreams of those not present, but who had shared a dream in the interviews of the previous session, were also read. While these could not be developed further, they were part of the overall picture being presented. Once all the dreams had been presented, we took a break.

Following the break, the small groups returned to the list of common elements and constructed a shared dream narrative. Here the goal was not necessarily to arrive at a consensus vision as much as to identify and include in the dream the ideas that generated energy and excited within the group. The goal here was to write a narrative, not just list the elements. The reason for this is that narratives have the power to inspire and engage the imagination in ways that a listing of characteristics is unable to do.

The final small group activity was to prepare to present their group dream to the full assembly of the participants. The dream groups were asked to present their dreams in a creative way, before reading the narrative. This use of presentations was a way of continuing the engagement of the imagination and to fan the flames of creativity. Before those presentations, I invited all to listen for ideas that excited them or “stirred their blood.”

The presentations proved to be a fun exercise with lots of laughter and spontaneous affirmation. Two examples will serve to illustrate this activity. One presentation was an enactment of a group of St. Agatha parishioners visiting a

philanthropist to “make a pitch” for his financial support of the parish dream. It gave them an opportunity to speak to the various elements that were envisioned. A second example was a roving CNN reporter visiting and interviewing various parishioners of St. Agatha asking them why the parish had been selected to receive a Parish of the Year award. This exercise allowed the participants to present their dream as they bragged about its fulfillment.

Following the presentations, I wrapped up the work of the session by noting the great amount of common elements that I had heard. Many of the participants nodded their agreement to this observation. I went on to list some elements that I had heard repeated. I noted features like:

- evangelization and the desire to grow the size of the church;
- concern for the neighborhood and justice ministries;
- spirit filled and vibrant worship with a choir that continued to inspire their pride;
- a welcoming and inviting spirit.

I reminded them that we would meet again in two weeks and that while in this session we had gone from 90 individual dreams to nine group dreams, that before we met again the core team would repeat the process that we had used and would take the nine dreams and construct **the** parish dream. That would be presented to them at the next session as the vision for the parish’s future. At that time they would be given an opportunity to help to begin to realize that vision. I ended my comments by thanking the participants for their work and asking them to give themselves a hand; and to express their appreciation for the core team as well. At that point, Fr. Larry called the assembly to prayer and led the blessing and dismissal rite.

Session Two---Valuation

The core team met again on the Tuesday evening after the session. We began by appreciating the session on Sunday and my asking: What did we do well? First of all, they valued the creative presentation of the group dreams, remarking that the groups enjoyed that activity. All noted with some pride the good turn out and the investment of the participants. One person mentioned being asked by an enthusiastic parishioner, “When do we meet again?” The human knot exercise was also viewed positively. I asked: What did you see that was really affirming of St. Agatha? A core team member spoke of specific examples where they saw the youth being affirmed. Others remarked on how much the parish seems to have in common. Others noted that the parish was blessed with many **committed** parishioners. Finally, I asked if we had learned anything through the session that we would want to be sure to keep in mind going forward. To that there was wide agreement that we want to always give “voice” to the people.

Following the valuation process we began to prepare for the next session. I had posted on the wall the nine group dreams which had been recorded on newsprint at that Sunday’s session. I then began to lead the process that we had used in Session Two to arrive at a common dream: we read the nine group dreams, listing important themes and common elements and then began to co-write a dream that could serve as a vision for the future of St. Agatha. It didn’t work! As in a previous attempt to co-write, we seemed to have a high level of general agreement, but could not agree on language to express that commonality. As we neared the agreed-upon ending time for our meeting, we asked that a writing team of Fr. Larry and two others to work together to draft a dream statement that would capture our discussion. They agreed and it was decided to see if we could

come to consensus via electronic communication, prior to the meeting the following week.

The meeting the following week was more productive and it needed to be, as this was the last opportunity for the core team to prepare for the third session. The writing team had done good work and had circulated a draft of a parish dream, soliciting comments. We began this meeting by reading their final draft⁸⁵ and affirming it as a vision that met the requirements of a good dream statement.⁸⁶ This was a vision that was desired, bold and provocative enough to inspire the parish to move forward, while being achievable by building on the current giftedness present in the parish. With that important and unanimous affirmation, we moved into the details of the final session.

The final session was a combination of the Design and Destiny phases. A key activity in this is the writing of provocative propositions, which precedes and focuses the design activity. Ordinarily, these proposition would be a work product of the full group of participants, or minimally the work of the core team. Here again I was faced with the need to compromise on process design to arrive at a process that could be effectively implemented. Working from the parish dream statement and drawing upon the many discussions of the core team and the two parish sessions, I drafted a set of six possibility propositions.⁸⁷

The importance of the possibility proposition is found in that they are the specific focus of the design phase.⁸⁸ The six propositions which we adopted, each expressed an

⁸⁵ See Chapter 2---Appendix 10.

⁸⁶ See Chapter 2---Appendix 9 for an easy reference.

⁸⁷ One team member was uncomfortable with the use of “provocative proposition” in a church setting. While I like the phrase and do not think it inappropriate, there was no reason to make an issue of it and we adopted the alternative phrase, possibility proposition. See Chapter 2---Appendix 11 for the possibility propositions that were developed.

⁸⁸ A fuller description of provocative propositions can be found in Chapter 1, 26-28.

essential element of the parish dream. Like a dream statement, they are rooted in the positive core that is already present within the community and they are expressed in a way that challenges the community by presenting a vision for the future that will stretch the parish beyond the current reality. By focusing the design efforts on these specific six elements of the dream, the design task is broken down and becomes more manageable. It also allows the participants to focus their own work in an area where they are interested and willing to invest their efforts.

Prior to the core team meeting I did ask the pastor to review the possibility propositions and he thought that they captured the essential elements of the dream and would appropriately focus the design phase. I presented the propositions to the core team and they too approved them, with only minor modifications. With their approval of the possibility propositions, I asked the core team members to indicate which of the propositions most strongly engaged their own imagination. I was somewhat surprised to see that each of the six propositions had advocates among the core team members, so they were enlisted to lead the design activity around “their” proposition at the session. I then briefly described the Open Space method that we would be using and their role as leaders in that process.⁸⁹

Design and Destiny

The third and final session of the AI process at St. Agatha was held on Sunday, October 7, 2007. The guiding theme for the day was articulated as: **Designing the future: What is the road that St. Agatha will walk with Christ? Discerning the**

⁸⁹ This process will be described more fully in the next section.

invitation and call from God and making a personal and communal commitment to respond in faith.

Again the day was beautiful and began with a well attended and spirited celebration of Eucharist. There were about 65 people in attendance; a good number but it did continue the slight dwindling in the number of participants over the three sessions. The liturgical readings for the day were especially fortuitous. The first reading from the book of the Prophet Habakkuk (1:2-3, 2:2-4) included: “The Lord answered me and said: Write down the vision clearly upon the tablets, so that one can read it readily. For the vision still has its time, presses on to fulfillment, and will not disappoint; if it delays, wait for it, it will surely come, it will not be late.” The second reading from Paul’s letter to Timothy (2Timothy 1:6-8, 13-14) was a reminder of the gift of the Spirit which God had given. The Gospel passage from Luke (17:5-10) was the parable of the mustard seed; a parable to assure the apostles that they had adequate faith for the task at hand. In his preaching, Fr. Larry effectively connected the Scriptures to the task of the afternoon session, continuing what he had written in the parish bulletin that day:

The vision that we have as individuals, and the dream of St. Agatha that has emerged from the memories and dreams of over 100 parishioners that will be revealed today, are borne out of deep faith and the great hope that God will do great things for us if, as Paul says today to Timothy, we “stir into flames the gift of God that you have through the imposition of hands.” That gift given us through the Holy Spirit is a spirit, not of cowardice, but a spirit of “power, love and self control.” This, my friends, is the power of faith.

After lunch Fr. Larry began the session by leading prayer according to the usual format. He had chosen as the scriptural text the Lucan pre-Ascension story where Jesus promises to send his spirit to the apostles (Luke 24:36-49). He then revealed the Dream

of St. Agatha⁹⁰ which had been printed on a 3X4 foot sheet of paper and which was draped over the front of the altar. He read the dream and the people applauded but, to my ears, their reaction was not overly enthusiastic. Why? Maybe because they needed some time to absorb the rather long and involved statement? Maybe it was simply recognized as the compilation of the statements that they had previously heard. The reception was fine, just not rousing.

Again, the pastor's reflection was left open for me to continue. I introduced the session by recalling the work of the first two sessions and the preparation that the core team did to prepare for this session. I told them a story of the building of one of the great cathedrals of Europe. The story is of a new bishop who goes to review the work of a nearly completed (after decades of work) cathedral. He asks various workmen what they are doing and gets a detailed description of the task being performed. Carpenters reported on how they were constructing some pews. Stonecutters described how they were assembling the grand altar. He then asked a woman sweeping in the sacristy what she is doing and she replies, "Your Excellency, I am building a cathedral." I told the story as a way of encouraging them to always hold the vision before them and to see the value in every step that needs to be taken. I emphasized that the dream destination is reached step by step. That we do what is possible today and tomorrow new possibilities are revealed. While the dream is before us, our faithfulness is revealed in the taking of individual steps.

⁹⁰ See Chapter 2---Appendix 10.

I introduced the work of the session by explaining the possibility propositions and how we would be using them. For the process we used a modified Open Space method.⁹¹ A basic principle of the method is to allow participants to select the area of their involvement. This allows the participants to bring their passion to the work, as a means of encouraging the acceptance of responsibility for action. I described our “passion” as the gift that God has given each of us. Some are going to be passionate about how we worship. Others may care more about how we can grow the parish. Both areas are a part of the dream and God has given this parish (through the participants) the gifts that it needs to realize the vision. The open space process was to give them a chance to bring their gifts to the service of realizing the vision. By way of instruction, I promised them that they didn’t have to talk about anything unless it truly interested them and that they would have complete control over what action or work that they would be involved with going forward. To that end, I said that this was a time to be practical. As they were discussing the possibility propositions, they should make suggestions that they had the authority to decide and which they were willing to accept responsibility to implement. Therefore, this was not a time to say, “The parish council should...” Rather, this was a time to think, “I will do ‘what’, by ‘when’.”

With the process described, the core team member who was designated to lead the design process for each possibility proposition came forward and read the proposition. The participants were encouraged to listen and decide which proposition they most cared about and would work on. After they were all read, I answered questions to clarify the process and the scope of each proposition. This assisted people to decide where their

⁹¹ This method is described in detail in: Owen, Harrison. *Open Space Technology: A Users Guide*. 2nd ed., San Francisco: Berrett-Kohler Publishers, Inc., 1997.

passion would best find expression. I let people know that they could move between the groups if they had multiple interests. At that, we broke down into six groups where the propositions had been posted with some additional sheets of newsprint.

The process followed in the small groups proved to be very effective.⁹² An important part of that process design, was that the discussion concerning each element of the proposition began by appreciating the ways in which this element was already present in the parish. This appreciative approach was important in that it helped ground the discussion in that which is most live giving in the current reality. As such, each discussion was a small AI process that began with a Discovery phase.

While they worked, I circulated among the groups. They had a little over an hour to work. Periodically I would give additional instructions to the groups like: If you have an idea that you think will advance the parish towards the dream but don't know if it fits into the group you are in— put out the idea anyway.

There seemed to be great energy and interaction in the groups. People were clearly engaged, which became evident in the reports of their work. The reports were written on the forms provided, which was to aid the core team in the management task to follow.⁹³

After a short break we had the leaders report, giving all the detail that they could. Every group had surfaced multiple ideas and had begun to act on them. Almost every idea had accountability assigned. People seemed “wowed” by some of the reports and the ideas that surfaced. Some ideas received spontaneous support and affirmation. I was

⁹² The small group leader's guide for one of the possibility propositions can be found in Chapter 2---Appendix 12. Similar guides were prepared for each of the six design groups working on the individual possibility propositions.

⁹³ See Chapter 2---Appendix 13 for a sample of the report form.

amazed by the breadth of ideas and the creativity. Many practical and do-able ideas were presented.⁹⁴

After each report I had the team stand and be recognized and there seemed to be genuine appreciation of the reports and the ideas that were being presented. I closed the reporting with some observations that affirmed the work that the parish had done through this process. I noted the energy and excitement that was present. I affirmed the principles of appreciative inquiry as a way of continuing to move forward and especially encouraged that the parish keep the positive image of the vision always before them. I stated my respect for what they had done and that they had a great dream, which I believed that they would live their way into it. In fact, through the process they had already realized parts of their dream. These comments were affirmed by many who nodded their agreement.

Fr. Larry then began the closing of the session by stating his pride in the parish and his appreciation of all that they had done. He affirmed the core team and had them recognized. He also thanked me and the participants were very warm in their applause and appreciation.

For the closing ritual, he had everyone come forward to the altar and sign the dream and remain gathered around the altar. Then we joined hands and prayed in a circle and sang along to a recording of “Grateful” by Hezekiah Walker. It was quite moving and seemed a fitting way to end the process.

⁹⁴ See Chapter2---Appendix 14 for one such report.

Session Three---Valuation

The core team met the Tuesday after the final session and we began by appreciating the session on Sunday. I began by asking: What did we do well and what did you most appreciate about the session? There was enthusiasm as we discussed the open space method and the freedom that it allowed for people to choose where to work. It was noted how the parishioners had taken ownership of the parish and were willing to accept responsibility. Many commented that there was a lot of engagement and energy in the room and they were impressed by the steadfast commitment of people to the process.

I then asked: What was affirming of the parish? It was noted that the parish has a lot to build upon and they recognized the giftedness present in the parish. The interaction in the groups was open and everyone's idea was welcomed and respected. Specifically one person noted that no one said: "We tried that before and it didn't work." The core team valued that St. Agatha now has an organized plan for going forward. The "learning" from the session was that people will accept responsibility for that which they care about.

I think that the value of AI in assisting an organization to plan and to create a vision for the future was again affirmed through this process. It is clear that through the process, St. Agatha has a much clearer picture of its hopes and dreams and have taken very concrete steps that will assist them to be the kind of parish that they desire. However, the thesis that I was testing was not the effectiveness of an AI process to do planning for the future. Rather, my investigation was to determine if AI can be an effective means of restoring or contributing to the restoration of communion in a community that has had their organizational relationship disrupted by conflict or a

negative event; can AI add to the praxis of reconciliation? It was to this question that I now directed the core team and their reflections on this will be presented in Chapter 5.

Following the valuation of the overall process and its effect on the community of St. Agatha, we briefly returned to organizational matters of implementing and continuing the work of the process. This final work had two areas of focus.

The first was to discuss how St. Agatha can continue the process that has begun. This discussion included practical issues of communication with parishioners who were not involved in the process and giving them a way to bring their gifts to the parish and participate in the fulfillment of the vision. It also put into place ways of monitoring the work plans developed in the proposition work groups. In an amazing display of empowerment, in about ten minutes they redesigned the parish council, giving prominence to the six areas identified through the possibility propositions.

The second focus was to look at ways that St. Agatha can continue to operate according to the principles of AI and continue to co-construct the life of the parish. We looked at some practical ways of always maintaining a positive focus by beginning every discussion in the parish with an inquiry into the life giving forces, the blessings, that are present in the current situation. The hope is that St. Agatha has created a sustainable change in their organizational culture, which will allow them to be continually creative and faithful to the vision that they have discerned through this process.

My project does not include the ongoing monitoring of the effects of this process, but one effect of my facilitation of the process was that I am also invested in the “success” of St. Agatha and I look forward to observing and hearing about their future.

Chapter Three

Communion Ecclesiology: Vision and Praxis

In the 2004 Catholic Common Ground Initiative lecture, the journalist John Allen noted that while there is much discussion within the Church in regard to the polarization that is experienced, there is very little dialogue. He comments:

When it comes time for discussion, I am often startled at how quickly things degenerate into disputation. The alarming phenomenon is not merely that Catholics seem angry with one another, but that they increasingly seem to be speaking separate languages. Self-identified ‘progressive’ Catholics read their own publications, listen to their own speakers, attend their own conferences, and think their own thoughts. Self-identified ‘conservatives’ do the same thing. Hence when you bring people from these two camps into the same room, they have moved so far down separate paths that even if there is good will for a conversation, quite often a shared intellectual and cultural framework is missing.⁹⁵

Allen continues to note that if it is to lead to unity, that needed intellectual and cultural framework, must be found in Catholic tradition.

The theologian and ecclesiologist Dennis Doyle looks to communion ecclesiology to provide that needed framework. “The problem facing U.S. Catholicism today lies not so much in its diversity,” he writes, “as in the lack of a unifying vision that mediates among the various stances and approaches to provide some sense of a shared Catholic identity.”⁹⁶ Doyle believes communion ecclesiology offers such a needed vision. He begins his work, *Communion Ecclesiology* with the declaration, “The vision of the

⁹⁵ John Allen, “A Spirituality of Dialogue for Catholics,” *Origins*, vol. 34 (July 15, 2004): 123.

⁹⁶ Dennis Doyle, *Communion Ecclesiology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2000), 136.

Church as communion enlightens and inspires. The process of dialogue in the spirit of communion fosters hope and encouragement.”⁹⁷

Doyle acknowledges that there are competing versions of communion ecclesiology; in fact, he identifies six distinct theological approaches.⁹⁸ Doyle often identifies these distinct approaches with the theologian whose work develops the approach. Usually this is done dialogically; first the approach is presented and then it is brought into dialogue with the concerns or objections raised by other theologians. In this comparative approach, Doyle employs an investigative method that is consistent with the principles of the ecclesiology that he is investigating. In doing so, he gleans from each approach what he believes is essential and creates a synthesis. This synthetic understanding of communion ecclesiology is then offered, not in the form of a definitive theological synthesis; rather he identifies five “touchstones” or elements which he thinks are essential for any authentic communion ecclesiology. I want to highlight Doyle’s dialogical approach and suggest that such an approach be a model for a faith community that desires reconciliation and seeks to reestablish communion.

I approach a study of communion ecclesiology from the pastoral concern of one who ministers within the Church and has a particular concern for reconciliation within that Church. I experience the fragmentation and division within the church to be scandalous, in the strict sense that this very public polarization hinders the evangelical mission of the church. The Church can not effectively preach the Good News of Jesus unless we are a more visible embodiment of the Word which we preach. But the scandal is deeper than the hindering of the mission, it is an unfaithfulness to what the Church is

⁹⁷ Ibid., 1.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 19

called to *be*. The French theologian, J.-M. R. Tillard puts it quite succinctly when he writes:

It is very obvious that the Christian witness as such (the *martyria*) is tied to the visible unity of the disciples of Christ. Because how can one announce *truly* and in a credible way the Gospel of reconciliation in Jesus Christ while presenting oneself to the world as disciples of Christ who are divided among themselves and have put up new barriers? But what is at stake here is not limited to the missionary impact of the message. It is essentially a question of being what one is called to be, of doing what is necessary so that the work of God has the quality that it should have, to glorify the Father by manifesting the authentic nature of his plan, of giving Salvation its full dimension.”⁹⁹

I am far from unique in holding this concern. In those recurring discussions that I spoke of in the opening paragraph of this paper, always the recognized need and desire for reconciliation is present in those groups of ministers telling the horror stories of a polarized Church. We all desire and hope for a vision of Church that we can present to our fellow believers, through preaching and lived witness, which can inspire others and promote the healing of the divisions which fracture our unity.

For Doyle, “communion ecclesiology is a content and a process, a vision and a summons to higher ground.”¹⁰⁰ Put another way, for one who seeks reconciliation within the church, communion ecclesiology is a vision which we strive to embody and it is a spirituality that we must live if we are to fulfill that vision. In this chapter I will use that framework to approach the topic in two parts.

⁹⁹ J.-M. R. Tillard, *Church of Churches: The Ecclesiology of Communion*, trans. R.C. De Peaux (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1992), 36.

¹⁰⁰ Doyle, *Communion Ecclesiology*, 9.

The first part will utilize the five touchstones for the vision presented by Doyle: Divine, Mystical, Sacramental, Historical and Social.¹⁰¹ In this, I will rely heavily on Doyle's *Communion Ecclesiology* and the sources which he cites. Here I wish to imitate his goal of developing a synthesis of the necessary elements which can frame a Catholic vision of the Church, which can be the necessary framework for dialogue within the Church. In doing so, I propose to answer for myself, as well as for others the questions: What and who are we supposed to be as a Church? What is the vision of faithfulness that we need to keep ever before us?

In the second part, my concern will shift to praxis. Being Church is a spiritual activity and within communion ecclesiology is an inherent spirituality. This will not be a full development of praxis, but it is offered as a possible movement towards a praxis which arises out of reflection on my own journey of attempting to integrate this ecclesial vision into my lived spiritual life. Here my guiding questions will be: How do we live our way into the vision of communion ecclesiology? In particular, what does this vision require of a member of the Church in their relationship with others within the Church?

Communion Ecclesiology

The development of communion ecclesiology is dynamic and ongoing. Our current understanding has grown out of the interplay of many voices over time. The Second Vatican Council and the subsequent theological discussion of the documents of that council have a central place in that development.

In 1985, marking the twentieth anniversary of the close of the council, there was an Extraordinary Assembly of the World Synod of Bishops. At that Synod, the bishops

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 175-178.

affirmed their “conviction that the Second Vatican Council is a gift of God to the Church and the world.”¹⁰² In their affirmation of the work of the council, they also sought to emphasize certain theological themes contained in the documents of the council. Of particular concern was their desire to shed light into the ongoing discussion of ecclesiology.

In the “Final Report” of the Synod they begin the section of The Church as Communion with, “The ecclesiology of communion is the central and fundamental idea of the council’s documents.”¹⁰³ They go on to clarify certain aspects of communion ecclesiology; I will return to this statement in the course of this chapter. While many of the foundational principles for communion ecclesiology are found in the documents of the council, here I will report more on the work of the theologians who have discussed the documents and have put flesh on the underlying principles articulated at the council. In the words of Joseph Komonchak, “The council sought to set out the elements of the Church’s life but left it to the theologians to construct a synthesis of them.”¹⁰⁴

In 1992, the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) also “weighed in” on the development of communion ecclesiology. Doyle notes a report in *L’Osservatore Romano* (June 17, 1992) that with the release of the document, “Some Aspects of the Church’s Understanding of the Church as a Communion,” the then Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger said of communion ecclesiology that:

ultimately there is only one *basic ecclesiology*, which certainly can be approached and worked out in different ways, depending on the various

¹⁰² Extraordinary Synod of 1985, “Message to the People of God,” *Origins*, vol. 15, (December 19, 1985): 442.

¹⁰³ Extraordinary Synod of 1985, “Final Report,” *Origins*, vol. 15, (December 19, 1985): 448.

¹⁰⁴ Joseph C. Komonchak, “The Significance of Vatican Council II for Ecclesiology” in *The Gift of the Church*, ed. Peter Phan (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000), 76.

aspects that are stressed or highlighted. Nevertheless, every exposition must take into account the harmony of the various essential elements of an ecclesiology which intends to be Catholic.¹⁰⁵

Doyle notes that the significance of this statement is that while communion ecclesiology is the one basic ecclesiology, it legitimately exists in various versions, although the Roman Catholic version must include certain essential elements if it is to in fact be “Catholic.”¹⁰⁶ In his book *Communion Ecclesiology*, Doyle respects those essential elements and includes them with his “touchstones” schema. He seeks to bring them into a harmony that represents an authentic Catholic ecclesiology. It is the interplay of those elements, the way that various theologians emphasize one over (and sometimes at the expense of) the other, which has been the point of debate in the development of communion ecclesiologies. Before turning to these, I wish to note those elements that seem to be universally present and which form both the foundation and the motivation for those debates.

Among the various versions of communion ecclesiology, Doyle finds four elements that are seemingly always present. The first is that communion ecclesiology is an effort of *ressourcement*, that is, an attempt to connect with the original vision of the Church held by the first millennium Christians, prior to the division among the Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Protestant Christians.¹⁰⁷ Secondly, communion ecclesiology places an emphasis on the spiritual relationship between humans and humans with God, over the more juridical and institutional aspect of the church. Thirdly, communion ecclesiology holds the shared participation in Eucharist as being a needed

¹⁰⁵ *L’Osservatore Romano* [English edition], 17 June 1992, 1.

¹⁰⁶ Doyle, *Communion Ecclesiology*, 1-2.

¹⁰⁷ For a more complete investigation of *ressourcement* see Marcellino D’Ambrosio, “*Ressourcement* theology, *aggiornamento*, and the hermeneutics of tradition,” *Communio* 18 (Winter 1991) 530-555.

visible sign of unity. And finally, there is a dynamic interplay between unity and diversity. This is especially seen in the discussion concerning the relationship of the universal and particular churches.¹⁰⁸

Church as Divine

An important and essential element of communion ecclesiology is that our understanding of our identity as a Church is rooted in our belief in the doctrine on the Trinity. The very influential French theologian Henri de Lubac wrote, “God did not make us ... for the fulfilling of a solitary destiny; on the contrary, He made us to be brought together into the heart of the life of the Trinity. ... The people united by the unity of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit: that is the Church.”¹⁰⁹

This element of the communion ecclesiology is based on a theological anthropology that rejects the notion that the individual is the basic unit of human reality and posits instead a view that humans are essentially social. This reflects the relational reality of the three persons within the one God: that God is both one and a community. For humankind, individuality remains crucial, but not more essential than community. Just as the unity of the three persons of the Trinity is essential to our understanding of God, our interrelatedness as humankind is a necessary element of understanding humankind. In this way, the Trinity provides the relational foundation for understanding the Church, and in the vision of communion ecclesiology, the Church is to be a visible sign of that Trinitarian unity.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 13.

¹⁰⁹ Henri de Lubac, *The Splendour of the Church*, trans. Michael Mason (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1956), 174-175.

¹¹⁰ Doyle, *Communion Ecclesiology*, 14.

A further implication of this connection between the Trinity and Church is that it gives communion ecclesiology both a “vertical” and a “horizontal” dimension. Susan Wood writes that there is a “vertical communion in grace with the Father, Son and Spirit modeled after the communion of the three persons of the Trinity, and a horizontal communion with companion Christians within the ecclesial community.”¹¹¹ This double dimension of communion will reoccur in other elements of communion ecclesiology.

The Mystical Church

Closely related to the divine element, our understanding of the Church must include a mystical element. While the divine element was a corrective response to the reductive distortion¹¹² of individualism, the mystical element seeks to correct those that see the Church as a purely human institution. Doyle states that this reductive distortion is most common among Protestants and some first world Catholics.¹¹³ The mystical Church is more than a mere human institution and it is more than the “fallible receiver of divine revelations.”¹¹⁴ The Church is a mystery that is itself a revelation of God.

Images found in scripture and which are prominent in the council documents are the Church as the Body of Christ and the doctrine on the communion of the saints. These images highlight the mystical and transcendent nature of the church. In communion ecclesiology, the Church is understood as being more than an institution that is rooted in a particular time and place, rather it transcend those limitations to describe a relationship among all the faithful through all of time.

¹¹¹ Susan K. Wood, “The Church as Communion,” in *The Gift of the Church*, ed. Peter Phan (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2000), 160.

¹¹² Doyle uses the phrase “reductive distortion” to “mean an approach that excludes or seriously de-emphasizes important elements of the phenomenon being studied.” *Communion Ecclesiology*, 14.

¹¹³ Doyle’s reference to “first world Catholics” appears to be a reference to European and North American Catholics.

¹¹⁴ Doyle, *Communion Ecclesiology*, 15.

Within the ecclesiological discussion, it is perhaps the theology of Henri de Lubac and Hans Küng that offers the “point and counter point.” “De Lubac grasped well the mystical form of relationality in which images and symbols are used to express glimpses of the Church as mystery.”¹¹⁵ Doyle demonstrative this capacity as he gives examples from the works of Henri de Lubac. “The Church is truly the mystical Body of Christ in that it represents the spiritual and social reunification of the unity of humankind. The Church is truly the Bride of Christ because it is so closely united with him. The Church is our mother because it brings Christians to birth within the Body of Christ.”¹¹⁶

In contrast to de Lubac, Küng has little patience with such use of imagery to paint a picture of an ideal Church that is not based in the present experience of the Church. For Küng, the Church, especially as he viewed the particular church of Rome, is primarily a political and human reality. While Doyle credits Küng for his contribution to the development of communion ecclesiology, citing in particular Küng’s emphasis on community through Christ and the Spirit, with its encouragement for ecumenical dialogue and reconciliation, Doyle notes Küng’s denial of any mystical element as an extreme reductive distortion.¹¹⁷

The integration of a mystical element into communion ecclesiology demonstrates the importance of an analogical imagination.¹¹⁸ The use of analogies to point to the various aspects of communion ecclesiology allows those competing elements to be held together in one theological construct. An analogy does not claim to be an all inclusive definition or description, but an image that points towards a truth. It is through the use of

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 64.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 64.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 120-125.

¹¹⁸ For a comprehensive treatment of this concept see: David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroads, 1991).

Church as Sacrament

The Church as sacrament is an important theme in the documents of the Second Vatican Council, especially *Lumen Gentium*. “Since the Church is in Christ like a sacrament or as a sign and instrument both of a very closely knit union with God and of the unity of the whole human race, it desires now to unfold more fully to the faithful of the Church and the whole world its own inner nature and universal mission.”¹²⁰ Doyle gives inspirational credit to Henri de Lubac for this understanding. He quotes de Lubac: “If Christ is the sacrament of God, the Church is for us the sacrament of Christ; she represents him, in the full and ancient meaning of the term, she really makes him present.”¹²¹ Like Christ who is both fully human and fully divine, as a sacrament of Christ, the church too shares that dual nature. As a sacrament, the church has both visible and invisible elements.¹²²

Doyle describes the significance of the sacramental nature of the church succinctly.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 65.

¹²⁰ *Lumen Gentium*, no. 1. Other reference to the Church as sacrament can be found in *Lumen Gentium* 9 & 48; *Gaudium et Spes* 45; *Ad Gentes* 5; *Sacrosanctum Concilium* 5 & 26.

¹²¹ Henri de Lubac. *Catholicism*, trans. Lancelot C. Sheppard (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1958), 29.

¹²² Another important resource for understanding the sacramentality of the Church is found in Edward Schillebeeckx, *Christ the Sacrament of the Encounter with God*, trans. Paul Barrett (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1963).

The Church consists of sacramental communities of Christians who love each other, existing simultaneously as local church and as embodiment of the universal church. The Eucharist and the episcopacy both function as essential structures that bring unity to the local churches. The Eucharist is the celebration *par excellence* through which the reality of the Church finds its fullest expression. The bishop, in his connection to the Eucharist, symbolizes the unity of love that exists among the people of a local church (diocese). The Church universal exists in and is formed out of these local church communities; conversely, the local churches exist in and are formed out of the Church universal. The Church universal, which exist as a reality in its own right, and not simply as a sum of local churches or as a federation, is realized as, in the Tillard's phrase, a "Church of churches... a communion of communions."¹²³

Two key areas need further explanations: the importance of Eucharist as a sign and celebration of the sacramental nature of the Church and the relationship of the universal and particular church.

In "Some Aspects of the Church Understood as Communion," as head of the CDF, Joseph Ratzinger writes, "The eucharist is the creative force and source of communion among the members of the church, precisely because it unites each one of them with Christ himself. ...Hence the Pauline expression *the church is the body of Christ* means that eucharist, in which the Lord gives us his body and transforms us into one body, is where the church expresses herself permanently in most essential form."¹²⁴ In this, Ratzinger is echoing the "Final Report" of the Extraordinary Synod. There the bishops defined communion to be "fundamentally a matter of communion with God through Jesus Christ in the sacraments. ...The communion of the eucharistic body of Christ signifies and produces, that is, builds up, the intimate communion of all the

¹²³ Doyle, *Communion Ecclesiology*, 176. The Jean-Marie Tillard citation is from *Church of Churches: The Ecclesiology of Communion*, trans. R.C. DePeaux (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1992), 29.

¹²⁴ Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. "Some Aspects of the Church Understood as a Communion." *Origins*, vol. 22 (July 25, 1992), 108-109. Hereafter: CDF, "Some Aspects."

faithful in the body of Christ, which is the Church.”¹²⁵ Eucharist is both vertical and horizontal.

Susan Wood help clarify the connection between Eucharist as a means of embodying the relationship of the church universal and the particular churches in communion ecclesiology. She writes:

A particular church is not a subdivision of the universal Church, but is related to the universal church as the Eucharist is related to its manifold celebration. . . . The universal Church is not an idealized concept or simply the sum of the particular churches. It is defined in terms of the Eucharist, which transcends the localized particularity of the eucharistic presence in a specific community. The universal Church subsists in, but is not limited to, each particular church in the analogous way to which Christ is entirely present in, but not limited to, each eucharistic celebration.¹²⁶

The relationship of the universal Church and particular churches is actively debated by theologians. In the *Church as Communion*, Avery Dulles describes the debate with communion ecclesiology as being between those with “universalist” and “particularist” tendencies. In a move toward *ressourcement* universalists point to the founding of the Church on Peter as being a universal society and that the division into particular churches developed historically. Their version of communion ecclesiology represents a unity through participation in the divine life, mediated through the sacraments. In contrast, those with particularist tendencies would start with the diversity of the churches in the New Testament communities. While the primacy of Rome is recognized, diversity is represented as the original situation of the church. Therefore,

¹²⁵ Extraordinary Synod of 1985, “Final Report”, 448.

¹²⁶ Wood “Church of Communion”, 164.

unity should only be required in necessary matters and the recognition and respect of differences within the particular churches should be the norm.¹²⁷

Following the publishing of “Some Aspects of the Church Understood as Communion,” Joseph Ratzinger and Walter Kasper engaged in a published discussion about this issue. Essentially, they were in agreement, but a point of contention surfaced about a statement contained in the CDF document. About the universal Church it reads: “It is not the result of the communion of the churches, but in its essential mystery it is a reality ontologically and temporally prior to every particular church.”¹²⁸ To some, the subsequent discussion about if the universal Church preexists the establishment of any particular church, could read like a discussion about which comes first, the chicken or the egg. However, the feared implication that such a position by the CDF was going to be used to support a centralist agenda within the church,¹²⁹ was a central concern in their discussion.

Doyle states that it is the reductive distortion of juridicism that needs the corrective image of a “communion of communions,” which is found within the element of the sacramental nature of Church. He notes that this form of reductive distortion is common among Catholics. This is especially visible within much of the conflict present in the polarized Church and gets represented by some more traditional Catholics who tend to define the Church with a focus on the magisterium. Within those discussions, an

¹²⁷ Ibid., 171.

¹²⁸ CDF, “Some Aspects”, 109.

¹²⁹ Ratzinger denied such an agenda on the part of the CDF by stating that the church of Rome, although it had a special role of leadership within the universal Church, was also a particular church and could not be equated with the universal Church. Hence, his positing the universal Church as being *a priori* could not be used to support a centralist agenda. This position is expressed in “The Local Church and the Universal Church”, *America*, 185, no.16. (December 19, 2001) 8.

articulation of the sacramental nature of the Church might create movement towards unity.

The Historical Church

While some may lean towards an idea of a Church that is too human, the opposite is also detrimental to a Catholic communion ecclesiology. It is equally a distortion to think of the Church only in divine, mystical or sacramental terms. Here again we see the necessity of including both vertical and horizontal dimensions in our understanding. The Church is also an institution of fallible human beings that is situated in the context of time and place. A Catholic vision of communion ecclesiology must be willing to recognize the truth that the Church that is situated in history has at times failed to live the divine elements; we have developed, changed and at times, have erred grievously.

Here the corrective image offered in the documents of the Vatican Council is one of a Church that is a pilgrim People of God. In Doyle's words:

The ecclesiology of Vatican II envisions the Church as having emerged organically and continually as communities that have grown from the love that exists among Jesus and his disciples. It continues to exist as an actual historical relatedness between human beings and the three-personed God. It is thus that the church represents the visible breaking in of the kingdom of God about which Jesus preached, and it is the seed of that kingdom, present among us, not yet attained its fullness.¹³⁰

While the Church is the “universal Sacrament of salvation,”¹³¹ salvation must be worked out in a real way in history. De Lubac writes, “For if the salvation offered by God is in fact the salvation of the human race, since this human race lives and develops in time, any account of this salvation will naturally take on historical form — it will be the

¹³⁰ Doyle, *Communion Ecclesiology*, 177.

¹³¹ *Gaudium et Spes*, 45.

history of the penetration of humanity by Christ.”¹³² For de Lubac, like Rahner and Schillebeeckx, there is a recognition that the presence and activity of God is present in the sacramental action of the Church and in the context of everyday life.¹³³

In this area of the theological discussion, Karl Rahner was an important champion of the need to include a human dimension within communion ecclesiology. With a practical orientation, his theology represents a willingness to embrace positive change for the sake of reform within a human church, especially the change of structure. “Rahner would be more likely to emphasize the Church in its journey through history, ... than to elaborate theologically what it means for the Church to be the Body of Christ or the Bride of Christ.”¹³⁴

The Social Dimension of the Church

In its extreme form, the distortion of mystification described above can become exclusivism. By exclusivism, Doyle refers to those that can see nothing holy outside the Church. This is reminiscent of the arrogance and isolation of some in the pre-Vatican II life of the Church which would boast of the holiness of the Church as the sole mediation of the salvation of God. “The presence of grace and goodness outside the visible confines of the Church is ignored, minimized or denied. Communion ecclesiology draws upon both *Lumen Gentium* and *Gaudium et Spes* for the image of the Church as the leaven in the world.”¹³⁵

¹³² De Lubac, *Catholicism*, 69.

¹³³ Doyle, *Communion Ecclesiology*, 21. In support of this statement Doyle references, Karl Rahner, *The Church and the Sacraments*, trans. W. J. O’Hara (Freiburg:Herder, 1963) and Edward Schillebeeckx, *Christ the Sacrament of the Encounter with God*, trans. Paul Barrett (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1963).

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 91.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 16.

Within communion ecclesiology, the image of the Church as leaven in the world has important implications. Primarily, it projects an “understanding of the church as a social body with a commitment to social justice and to global relationality. Christian solidarity is complemented by human solidarity.”¹³⁶ Secondly, “it expresses a vision of the world, with all of its ambiguities and negativities, as the essentially good arena in which the lives of those who belong to the Church are lived out.”¹³⁷

The herald bearers for this dimension of communion ecclesiology can be found in those theologians that approach the scriptures and theology with a hermeneutic of liberation, especially Latin American theologians like Gustavo Gutierrez and Leonardo Boff. Their concern for the liberation of the poor and the need for the Church to identify with the poor through a preferential option, challenges the Church to be and act as leaven in the world which can bring about the reign of God preached by Jesus. The contrasting, not contradicting, view point would be represented by the CDF which fears that liberation theology can take the church so far into the secular and political (Marxist) world that the Church becomes a merely human institution at the expense of the more divine and mystical aspects of her identity.

Within the vision that is communion ecclesiology, it is the creating of a balance or a synthesis of these five “touchstones” which makes the vision “Catholic.” Doyle calls Catholicity “a unity that embraces a broad but legitimate diversity.”¹³⁸ Here again he is influenced by his reading of de Lubac’s *Catholicism*. He writes:

According to de Lubac, the Catholic spirit calls for the broadest universality coupled with the strictest unity. ...The Catholic spirit

¹³⁶ Ibid., 177.

¹³⁷ Ibid., 16.

¹³⁸ Ibid., 61.

embraces the mystery that is at times expressed in paradox and refuses to reduce it to anything manageably one-sided and partial. The Church has a ‘flexible and vigorously structural unity’, rather than a ‘drab uniformity’ (*Catholicism* 152).¹³⁹

Of great importance and a chief source of discussion among theologians, is defining what can be included within “legitimate diversity.” That legitimate diversity is the theological principle of pluriformity and must be contrasted with the unacceptable “anything goes” of pure pluralism. In the “Final Report” of the Extraordinary Synod of 1985, the bishops write: “When pluriformity is true richness and carries with it fullness, this is true catholicity.”¹⁴⁰

Within this understanding, ecclesial orthodoxy must recognize pluriformity. To be Catholic is to be able to hold within our faith the multidimensional understanding of communion ecclesiology. “Heresy arises most often from selectively maintaining something that is true, to the exclusion of other things that are, however tensively, true at the same time.”¹⁴¹ Heresy is a narrow exclusivity. Heretics are those that lack the analogical imagination that allows them to hold the tension which is inherently a part of being Catholic.

In the CDF document “Some Aspects,” Benedict XVI quotes his predecessor as saying in a general audience in 1989: “The universality of the church involves, on one hand, a most solid unity, and on the other, a plurality and a diversification which do not obstruct unity, but rather confers upon it the character of ‘communion’.”¹⁴² To clarify, the document continues: “This plurality refers to both the diversity of ministries,

¹³⁹ Ibid., 60-61.

¹⁴⁰ Extraordinary Synod of 1985, “Final Report,” 448.

¹⁴¹ Doyle, *Communion Ecclesiology*, 61.

¹⁴² CDF, “Some Aspects,” 110.

charisms and forms of life and apostolate within each particular church, and to the diversity of tradition in liturgy and culture among the various particular churches.”¹⁴³

Preserving this unity and diversity is not only “a fundamental task of the Roman pontiff” but “a task for everyone in the church, because all are called to build it up and preserve it each day.”¹⁴⁴

It is to that decidedly spiritual task that I now turn.

Towards a Praxis of Communion

In the Apostolic Letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, Pope John Paul II wrote that: “To make the Church *the home and school of communion*: that is the great challenge facing us in the millennium which is now beginning, if we wish to be faithful to God’s plan and respond to the world’s deepest yearning.”¹⁴⁵ He then asks the important question: “But what does this mean in practice?”¹⁴⁶ He answers the question by saying that before making practical plans, what is needed is to promote a “spirituality of communion.”¹⁴⁷

Spirituality

John Paul II outlines a spirituality of communion with four elements or characteristics. The first is that a spirituality of communion must be mystical in that it is primarily rooted in the heart’s contemplation of the mystery of the Trinity dwelling in us. Secondly, the spirituality embodies a solidarity with our brothers and sisters whom we recognize and accept as being part of ourselves, in the unity of the Mystical Body. In this solidarity we are able to share in the joys and the sorrows of their lives and live together

¹⁴³ Ibid., 110.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 111.

¹⁴⁵ John Paul II. Apostolic Letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, (January 6, 2001). n.43.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., n.43.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., n.43.

in a deep and genuine friendship. Thirdly, that solidarity implies that we hold others in a positive regard, recognizing the giftedness of each person, gifts which are not just given to them directly, but which are also given to us through our relationship with them. Finally, a spirituality of communion must embody a hospitality that knows how to “make room” for our brothers and sisters. Without following this spiritual path, John Paul II warned that any external structures of communion will serve little purpose and will be “mechanisms without a soul.”¹⁴⁸

A praxis of communion must be built upon the foundation of a radical commitment to unity within the church. As noted above, this is a “duty” of all Catholics, but it is a duty that needs to be embraced not out of a sense of obligation, but out of love for the vision of communion ecclesiology. To be in union with brothers and sisters in the Church is a requirement of faithfulness, but the fulfillment of the requirement is the joy of communion.

To be in communion as a Church is a measure of our faithfulness, both individually and communally. Our faithfulness to God is intrinsically linked to our communion with one another in the Church. This two-fold direction of faithfulness, the “horizontal” and the “vertical,” is apparent in the scriptures and in communion ecclesiology. Yet it is a constant temptation to separate the love of God from our love of neighbor; to separate communion with God from communion as a Church. It is the remembering and embracing of that inseparable link that helps us to make the radical commitment to unity.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., n.43.

Eucharist

It is Eucharist that provides the central image for Church in communion ecclesiology and it is table fellowship which must be at the center of a praxis of communion.¹⁴⁹ A radical commitment to unity includes a commitment to stay at the communion table. This has a two fold effect.

First, through our participation in the celebration of Eucharist, we keep the central image of communion ecclesiology before us. It is in the celebration of Eucharist that the divine, mystical and sacramental dimensions of communion ecclesiology are made real; that which is invisible is now made visible. In receiving the Body (and Blood) of Christ, we are reminded that we do so as the Body of Christ.

Secondly, Eucharist is the original sacrament of reconciliation. At Eucharist we remember and give thanks for the reconciliation of humankind through Christ. But even more so, through the prayer and sacramental action we ask that any breaks in our communion be healed so that our unity will be restored. When we look across the table at one from whom we are estranged, we are reminded that we are part of a mystical union that is greater than that which separates us. The table of Eucharist is to be a bridge of communion and reconciliation. In the ritual action of Eucharist, we enact our reconciliation

The seeming failure of Eucharist to, in fact, effect reconciliation within a divided church, is a particular source of sadness — more so, when the polarization that divided the community is liturgical, that is, about how we gather around the table. Such a

¹⁴⁹ See the CDF document, “Some Aspects,” especially no. 5.

situation, more than any other, requires of us that radical commitment to table communion.

Dialogue

Dialogue is also a key activity in the living of a spirituality of communion. Talking together becomes dialogue when the spiritual discipline of listening is joined with the speaking of truth. In faith communities or situations with diverse theological viewpoints, it is dialogue that can help us to restore or maintain communion.

“Listening is a spiritual discipline.”¹⁵⁰ It is spiritual in that the motivation to listen to another in a situation of conflict must be based in our living a commitment to unity. It is a discipline, in that it is often not easy and it requires practice. Often listening is not something that we desire to do; simply avoiding conversation with another when we know we have differing theological positions, often seems an attractive alternative. Without a spiritual commitment to communion and the discipline to live that spirituality, dialogue will not happen.

Authentic dialogue requires the speaking of truth. If you have suffered through polarized and conflicted discussions, your immediate question might be: Whose truth? The answer of course, is that each person must speak what they believe the truth to be, but speak their truth recognizing and respecting the principle of plurality. That is to acknowledge that there does exist legitimate diversity in a church of communion. In fact, there is no communion without that diversity. To live a spirituality of communion is to cherish and work for a unity that is broad enough to hold all legitimate diverse viewpoints; it is not to call for a uniformity to that which I perceive to be the truth.

¹⁵⁰ John Paul Lederach, *The Journey Towards Reconciliation* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1999), 152.

It is reported that when Cardinal Joseph Bernardin and his associates announced the Catholic Common Ground Initiative (CCGI), some of his fellow cardinals are said to have responded along the lines of: “Why do we need dialogue? The Church has spoken; people need to listen. Obedience is the common ground.” While their reception of the CCGI was cool, it has not prevented the participants in the Initiative from contributing to the development of a praxis of communion through their promotion of dialogue. Their contribution is both theoretical and practical; they offer “Principles of Dialogue,” “Characteristics of a CCGI Dialogue” and guidelines for their use in a parish setting. The “Principles” and “Characteristics” of Dialogue documents are stated briefly and practically with clarifying examples. They are presented in a way that makes them an effective resource to share in groups.

CCGI presents an approach to dialogue as a necessary aspect of being in communion and for restoring unity. For dialogue to be restorative of communion, requires that the participants recognize that truth is not contained in any single position and that no group can claim to be the saving remnant; that is, to claim that they are correct and that for faithfulness as a Church, everyone needs to believe like them. CCGI calls for the participants to be willing to suspend judgment about those with whom they disagree; to presume that all in the process are acting in good faith and with right motivation.¹⁵¹ Consequently, it is important to try to see the positive contribution that all are trying to make in the dialogue. And finally, since the goal of dialogue is communion as a Church (as expressed in the documents of Vatican II), all proposals or positions need to be considered pastorally, as well as, for the theological truth that they might contain or

¹⁵¹ This is very similar to the nonjudgmental narration of experience step in the Whitehead’s ministerial method. See James D. And Evelyn Whitehead, *Christian Ministry: Theological Reflection and Christian Ministry*, revised edition (Lanham, MD: Sheed and Ward, 1995), 106-107.

lack. This requires that we also consider the social reality in which that faith community is situated.¹⁵²

A Spirituality of Dialogue

In the Catholic Common Ground Initiative lecture previously cited, John Allen presented a spirituality of dialogue. It is offered here as a way of broaden the scope of discussion about the role of dialogue in the praxis of communion. That spirituality was presented through a schema containing five key elements.

“The first is a dose of epistemological humility.”¹⁵³ By this Allen simply means that we need to be willing to admit that we do not know everything. Hence, we should be open to the possibility that others might have something to teach us. If we rush to form our own opinion, without the encounter with the other through dialogue, we lose the opportunity to find the truth in that situation.

“The second is a solid formation in Catholic tradition as a means of creating a common language.”¹⁵⁴ There can be no dialogue without a common language which arises out of a shared intellectual understanding. Allen illustrates this point by noting the difficulty that many people in the United States have in understanding the documents which come out of the Vatican. Because those statements are written with an assumption of classic Aristotelian-Thomistic cultural formation, but get read by those with a liberal democratic world view, the result is often confusion and anger. It takes much dialogue

¹⁵² Catholic Common Ground Initiative, “Principles of Dialogue” and Characteristics of a Catholic Common Ground Initiative Dialogue,” <http://www.nplc.org/commonground/dialogue.htm> and <http://www.nplc.org/commonground/characteristics.htm>

¹⁵³ Allen, “Spirituality of Dialogue,” 125.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 125.

to negotiate meaning between intellectual frameworks and to establish a shared framework.

This highlights the need for the third element in a spirituality of dialogue, which is patience. Coming to a common understanding often requires that we dedicate the time needed to arrive at that understanding. “If the unity of the church is important (read: *if we have made a radical commitment to unity*- note added), then we need to give time to those with whom we tussle, time to understand and to be challenged.”¹⁵⁵

Fourth, a spirituality of dialogue requires perspective, meaning the capacity to see issues through the eyes of others.”¹⁵⁶ In this, I hear an echo of the call of John Paul II to live a spirituality of communion in solidarity with our brothers and sisters, seeing them with a positive regard as a gift to the church.

“Fifth and finally, we must foster a spirituality of dialogue that does not come at the expense of a full-bodied expression of Catholic identity. There is no future for dialogue if convinced Catholics sense the price of admission is setting aside their convictions.”¹⁵⁷ In *Novo Millennio Ineunte* John Paul II writes that “dialogue can not be based on religious indifferentism” but must be rooted in the truth that we believe.¹⁵⁸ The context of his statement is interreligious dialogue and the missionary duty of the Church for the proclamation of the Word, but it is equally applicable as a principle for a spirituality of dialogue within the church. He continues by saying that our “missionary duty does not prevent us from approaching dialogue *with an attitude of profound willingness to listen*” because of our belief in the presence of the mystery of grace that is

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 125.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 125.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 126.

¹⁵⁸ John Paul II, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, n.56.

the Holy Spirit.¹⁵⁹ In the same manner, dialogue in the Church must permit the expression of the truth that the participant believes, but speakers of truth must also be guided by a spirituality of communion which opens them to the presence of the Spirit in the words of others.

With this fifth element of his spirituality of dialogue, Allen has perhaps identified the largest obstacle to dialogue between self-identified progressives and self-identified conservatives within the Church. Among some conservatives, “dialogue” has come to mean conceding to relativism at the expense of truth. With them, there can be no dialogue unless the groundwork is laid to create a place where they can safely express their convictions. This does not mean that conservatives should be excused from giving an honest hearing to others who hold convictions which are contrary to their own, but praxis must account for their suspicion of dialogue.

The practice of creating a safe place where dialogue is possible and communion is encouraged could be a paper in its own right. Here I just offer one observation. On a practical level, as a self-identified progressive, I have found that I am more likely to receive a hearing after I have exercised the spiritual discipline of listening and I have demonstrated my understanding of the position that the other holds dear and understand the concerns within which that position is embedded. Because conservatives tend to greet an invitation to dialogue with suspicion, it can be beneficial for the one calling them to dialogue, to begin by assuming a posture of respectful listening.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., n.56.

Conclusion

By way of conclusion, I return to the importance of analogies. Our ability to live a spirituality of communion and dialogue is fostered when we have an appreciation for analogies and develop our analogical imagination. It is an analogical imagination that allows us to speak of the Church as the Body of Christ and to appreciate that there is something holy and divine, mystical and sacramental about being the Church. At the same time, we are able to speak of the Church as the People of God and the leaven in the world and recognize that as a Church we are part of a long lineage of fallible human beings with a unfolding history and an ever changing and very diverse social context in which we try to live out our faith. We are both — we are a Church that gazes heavenward in our response to God and a Church which looks to the side and sees that same God in the lives we share with other believers.

When we are able to speak analogically, we are able to express the truth of our own convictions and to leave room in the dialogue for the expression of conviction which we do not share. It is in that making of room for the other, that communion is fostered. And it is in communion that we realize a vision of Church that is faithful and expressive of our Roman Catholic tradition.

Tillard reminds us that “Communion is not the same as a gathering together of friends. ...It is the coming together in Christ of men and women who have been reconciled.”¹⁶⁰ For Tillard, the Church is formed through reconciliation that leads to communion. He writes:

¹⁶⁰ Tillard, *Church of Churches*, 48.

“The Church in this world is nothing more than the concrete portion of humanity inscribed into the sphere of reconciliation opened up by the Cross. Viewed from a historical perspective it proves to be the work of the Spirit taking human tragedy and immersing it in the power of communion and the peace of the Cross so that ... the design of the Father will come to fruition.”¹⁶¹

While communion is the vision which can guide the Church, it is the embodiment of a spirituality of communion which must be the visible sign of God’s plan for the community of the faithful. The hallmark of that plan of God is that all are reconciled in Christ. It is to reconciliation that I now turn.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 48.

Chapter Four

Towards a Practical Theology of Reconciliation

For the development of a practical theology of reconciliation, it is essential to bring into dialogue solid theological thought with the experience of ministry, which is understood in context. It is the purpose of this chapter to present an understanding of reconciliation which can be brought into dialogue with the experience of ministry that was described in Chapter Two. This chapter will unfold along the following trajectory.

I will begin with some theological considerations on the centrality of reconciliation to an understanding of the Incarnation and of the mission which is the Church. Not only will these consideration serve as a foundation for what follows, it will allow me the opportunity to reveal the biases that are present within my operative theology. Secondly, I will specifically address the concept and practice of reconciliation. In my ministry of reconciliation, I have relied on two authors to provide a framework for reflecting theologically and practically on my work, Robert Schreiter and John Paul Lederach. In this chapter, I am only able to provide a brief overview of certain aspects of their work. I will begin with the work of the theologian, Robert Schreiter, focusing on his articulation of a Christian spirituality of reconciliation and follow with how his work contributes to the praxis of reconciliation. I will then turn to John Paul Lederach. Again the focus here will begin with theory and move into a description of how he applies that theory in the praxis of reconciliation. I will conclude the chapter by observing some of the parallels and differences in the work of the two scholars and attempt a synthesis of their work which will serve as a theological dialogue partner in the next chapter.

Lederach is a sociologist by training and it may be considered unusual to cite his work in the development of a practical theology of reconciliation. He currently teaches in the Joan B. Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies at the University of Notre Dame and has engaged in the practice of peace making for several decades. While his academic preparation was in sociology, his motivation for the work springs out of his Mennonite background and the biblical vocation of peacemaking. While using predominantly sociological language, he reflects on his experience from the tradition of his Christian denomination and the Scriptures and allows that reflection to inform his praxis. As such, he uses what I consider to be a practical theology methodology.

Some Theological Considerations¹⁶²

Central to my understanding of the significance of the Incarnation is that the mission of Jesus was to bring about reconciliation. The definitive articulation of this is found in Ephesians 1: 3-10.¹⁶³

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and insight he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.

¹⁶² While I arrived at these considerations independently, it can be noted that they are quite similar to the thought found in John Paul Lederach, *The Journey Toward Reconciliation* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2003), chapter 11.

¹⁶³ All scriptural references are from the New Revised Standard Version, copyright, 1989, by the Division of Christian Education of the National Conference of the Churches of Christ in the United States.

In this Pauline teaching, the role of Jesus in the timeless plan of God is revealed. Jesus, through the redemptive shedding of his blood on the cross, fulfills the desire of God that we may be returned to our place as God's children. The covenant is renewed and made eternal as we are gathered back into the grace of communion with God. This is foundational to a Christian understanding of salvation history and community.

It was for reconciliation that God came to us in the person of Jesus. Simply, the mission of Jesus can be understood to be one of reconciliation. First of all, through the death and resurrection of Jesus, the way is open to all humankind to return to right relationship or communion with God. Secondly, the mission of Jesus was also essentially about the reconciliation of all humankind. The preaching ministry of Jesus, which finds its apex in the Sermon on the Mount narrative, is a call to establish the Reign of God, a reign in which justice is the hallmark of God's children living together in right relationship and a peaceful communion.

This is the twofold dimension of the reconciliation mission of Jesus: our redemption and reconciliation with God, won for us by Christ, is inseparable from the reconciliation and communion that Christians are to live with one another. Like the twofold commandment of love found in Luke 10:27, ("You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your souls, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.") reconciliation has both "vertical" and "horizontal" dimensions. They are two parts of the same reconciling work of Christ. "Vertical reconciliation is the reconciliation God works so as to restore humankind to communion with God. Horizontal reconciliation draws upon vertical reconciliation in order to bring

about healing in human relations, either between individuals or between groups of human beings.”¹⁶⁴

The mission of the Church is to continue that reconciling mission of Christ. The foundational passage for this is found in 2 Corinthians 5:17-20:

So if anyone is in Christ, they are a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All of this is from God, who has reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.

All ministry in the Church must be situated within this Christological understanding. As the continuation of the mission of Jesus, the faithfulness of the Church must be examined in light of our ministry of reconciliation. Does the work of the Church continue the twofold path of mediating the grace that brings about the reconciliation of sinners with God, as well as, mediating the grace which will bring to fruition the vision of the Reign of God which will be recognized in the lived experience of the communion of the Faithful? It is our answer to this question which largely provides the measure of our faithfulness in mission.

Theological Framework: A Christian Spirituality of Reconciliation

In his writings, Robert Schreiter notes that within the Christian tradition there are multiple understandings of reconciliation. Among Protestants, he writes: “there is an emphasis on reconciliation as the result of Christ’s death and justification by faith. ...If

¹⁶⁴ Robert J. Schreiter, “The Distinctive Characteristics of Christian Reconciliation,” an unpublished paper made available by the author. 1.

there is a classic location for a Protestant theology of reconciliation, it is Romans 5:6-11.”¹⁶⁵ For a Catholic emphasis, he points to the text of 2 Corinthians 5:17-20, where the emphasis is “on the love of God poured out as a result of the reconciliation God has effected in Christ. Here the emphasis is on the new creation.”¹⁶⁶

He acknowledges that he favors the Catholic emphasis in offering an extensive framework for understanding a Christian ministry of reconciliation, which he articulates around five central points or characteristics.

*1) It is God who initiates and brings about reconciliation.*¹⁶⁷

Reconciliation is, first and foremost, the work of God. Any ministry of reconciliation must “underscore Paul’s insight that we participate in the ministry of reconciliation as ambassadors on behalf of Christ. . . . We participate in God’s reconciling work.”¹⁶⁸ This is an acknowledgment that the grace required to transform that which separates and divide the Christian community must have God as its source. “For that reason, it can be said that for the Christian reconciliation is more a spirituality than a strategy.”¹⁶⁹ This does not mean that strategies are not part of a ministry of reconciliation. Strategies must be used to engage the parties in need of reconciliation. Rather, it acknowledges that a Christian praxis of reconciliation must be concerned with both the “vertical” and “horizontal” dimensions; for that we are dependent upon the gratuity of God.

¹⁶⁵ Robert J. Schreiter. *The Ministry of Reconciliation: Spirituality and Strategies* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998), 14.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 14.

¹⁶⁷ Each of these italicized headings are the same as used by Schreiter in “Distinctive Characteristics.” It can be noted that the listing of five elements differ slightly from his earlier work found in *Reconciliation: Mission and Ministry in a Changing Social Order*, although the theological thought is consistent.

¹⁶⁸ Schreiter, “Distinctive Characteristics,” 4.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.

Schreiter highlights two important implications of this characteristic of reconciliation. The first is that we must acknowledge that even the seemingly small offenses that separate two people, can have implications that go beyond the human capability to heal. This is even more evident in large scale social conflict. This recognition encourages one to not to trivialize the damage that the wrong doing inflicts. Secondly, when we participate in a ministry of reconciliation, we do so, as Paul says, as ambassadors acting on behalf of Christ (2 Corinthians 5:20). Because we are participating in the ministry of Christ, not our own, it underscores the importance for the minister of reconciliation to be grounded in a personal spirituality that allows them to listen to the inner voice of God and to be led by God's Spirit.¹⁷⁰

2) *In reconciliation, God begins with the victim.*

God initiates this work of reconciliation in the lives of the victims. This is contrary to a common cultural understanding of reconciliation, at least in the United States. Typically, one might think of reconciliation as beginning with the wrongdoer coming to acknowledgment of their guilt and going to their victim to seek forgiveness. But Schreiter writes, "God begins with the victim, restoring to the victim the humanity which the wrongdoer has tried to wrest away or to destroy. This restoration might be considered the very heart of reconciliation."¹⁷¹

In his earlier work on reconciliation Schreiter spoke of the violence that is the cause of conflict as being a narrative of the lie. The stories that we tell about ourselves, our origins, and our important relationships (family, community, country) strongly shape

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 4.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 15

our identity. Our identities are contained in the narratives that we tell of our lives.¹⁷²

“Violence tries to destroy the narratives that sustain people’s identities and substitute narratives of its own. These might be called narratives of the lie, precisely because they are intended to negate the truth of people’s own narrative.”¹⁷³ In God’s work of reconciliation, God begins with the victim as a way of bringing about the healing which can restore the truth of an individual’s humanity, as told in the creation narratives, that all human kind is a mirror image of the divinity of the Creator.

Further support for this characteristic is found through reflection on the mission of reconciliation of Christ as told in the narrative of his death and resurrection. It is God who initiates this act of reconciliation. Christ, who is the ultimate victim, came not in response to the repentance of a sinful people, but as a gracious gift of mercy bestowed on the undeserving.

3) *In reconciliation, God makes of both victim and wrongdoer a “new creation” (2 Cor. 5:17).*

While it is possible to think about reconciliation in terms of the restoration of right relationship, it is not a return of the relationship to its former state. Rather, something new is created. When there has been significant fracturing of the trust that is essential in relationships, there is no way to “forgive and forget;” there is no way to move into the future without the memory of the wrong that has been committed. Those events become a part of our identity as they reside in our memory. However, as Schreiter writes, “What happens in the healing that takes place in reconciliation is that we are taken

¹⁷² Schreiter, *Ministry of Reconciliation*, 19.

¹⁷³ Robert J. Schreiter. *Reconciliation: Mission and Ministry in a Changing Social Order* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992), 34.

to a new place, a place that we had not expected or measured out for ourselves. The moment of reconciliation comes, therefore, as a surprise, providing for us something that we could not have imagined.”¹⁷⁴

So while the memory of the past is retained, with reconciliation the memory is *re-situated* within the context of the victim’s life and it loses some of the toxicity, or the power that it has to be the primary memory that determines the identity of the victim. Perhaps the most significant aspect of this re-situation of the memory is that the victim is sometimes able to forgive their wrongdoer. The great beneficiary of an act of forgiveness is the one who forgives and who in the act of forgiving may be liberated from the toxic power of the wrong done to them and is no longer hostage to it. They can now create a future which is not determined by the narrative of the lie, or the wrong done to them.¹⁷⁵

In that act of forgiveness the wrongdoer is also made new because their identity is no longer defined by the wrong that they have committed. Rather, through the compassion of forgiveness, they are now seen as more than as one that is defined by their misdeed, and they too can be created anew and be restored to a fuller humanity.

4) *Christians pattern their suffering on the suffering, death, and resurrection of Christ.*

“For Christians, the ‘master narrative’ of divine reconciliation is found in the story of Christ’s suffering, death, and resurrection.”¹⁷⁶ For the Christian who has experienced trauma at the hand of another or the community that has been fractured by violence or wrongdoing, it is in that Paschal Mystery that we look for meaning.

¹⁷⁴ Schreiter, “Distinctive Characteristics,” 8.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹⁷⁶ Schreiter, *Ministry of Reconciliation*, 18.

While the Catholic Tradition holds that suffering can be redemptive, the personal experience of suffering is often a shattering and faith-threatening experience. As a Christian seeks to discover meaning in the suffering that they have endured, often a first response is to believe that through their suffering God is revealing some larger purpose. Schreiter points out the danger of such thinking which “may be guided by an oversimplified and even erroneous image of God as One who desires punishment or demands retribution.”¹⁷⁷ An alternative, he continues, is for the one who has suffered to identify with Christ, who also suffered (unjustly) on the cross. “Because Christians believe that Jesus did undergo suffering and a terrible death, and that God did not allow him to remain in death, but raised him from the dead, identifying their own suffering with the suffering of the innocent Jesus becomes a way of surviving the depredations that suffering brings upon us.”¹⁷⁸ A key element of this understanding is that in identifying with the Christ who suffers, the victim does not deny their suffering or minimize its impact on their life, but is able to be accompanied by Jesus through the suffering to reconciliation.

For those engaged in a ministry of reconciliation, the task is to accompany the one who suffers and to help them to find the means to recover their damaged humanity. To walk with another as they seek to pattern their life and the suffering that they have endured after the pattern of the cross and resurrection of Christ, requires that the minister have the spiritual resources for the task.¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁷ Schreiter, “Distinctive Characteristics,” 9.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 10.

5) *Reconciliation will be complete only when God has reconciled the whole world in Christ.*

Anyone who has been engaged in the work of reconciliation knows the enormity of the mission and the difficulty of effectively constructing peace. While this is apparent when we look at the need for reconciliation in places of global conflict, it is equally true in our efforts to bring reconciliation in a family or church, or even between two individuals. Efforts at bringing about reconciliation often result in less than the desired outcome. So how does the minister of reconciliation maintain hope and motivations for the mission?

There are two beliefs that must be incorporated into the thinking of the minister. The first is to remember that reconciliation is both a goal and a process. Here the temptation is to lose sight of the process aspect in our desire to see the fulfillment of the goal of reconciliation. It is necessary to remember that God is the primary agent of reconciliation and it is God's work in which we participate. While some movement towards reconciliation is possible, it is often incomplete and it is not within our power to provide the healing that leads to forgiveness and reconciliation. We cooperate with God. Which brings us to the second belief, which is articulated by St. Paul: "He has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth" (Eph 1:9-10).

The fullness of reconciliation will not be achieved until the end of time. On one level, this can be discouraging in the denial in the present time of the results that we desire. However, for the Christian it can also be a source of hope; a hope that arises out

of a trust in the word and power of God. For a Christian, hope is sustained, not by the achievement of success, but by faith that God remains present and with us in those time when success is fleeting. That eschatological good news is a distinctive characteristic of a spirituality of reconciliation.

Contribution to Praxis

In his development of theological framework for understanding a Christian spirituality of reconciliation, Schreier has provided a foundation for a Christian ministry of reconciliation. While the ministerial practice of reconciliation has not been his primary focus, he has also engaged in this work and brings a considerable breadth of knowledge of existing efforts in peacemaking and reconciliation. From the theological base, he writes of the praxis of reconciliation, although he paints a picture with broad brush strokes.

The reconciliation ministry of Jesus

An important source for Schreier in this regard is the post-resurrection appearance stories found in the Gospels, which he reads with a hermeneutic of reconciliation. From these, he first identifies a pattern in the reconciliation ministry of Jesus, and from that he extrapolates to offer some implications for the praxis of reconciliation.

One such example is found in his reading of the Breakfast at the Seashore passage found in John 21:1-17. The story is familiar. Simon Peter and some of the others had returned to Galilee and had taken up their former way of life. It is as if, Schreier

suggests, they are wanting to close the book on the Jesus story.¹⁸⁰ It isn't going so well. They have fished all night without success. Jesus enters the scene as an unrecognized stranger. He alters their fishing strategy and they are successful. In their success, they recognize Jesus and they return to shore, led by Simon Peter. The disciples are not only surprised to see that it is Jesus, but must be surprised to discover that he is cooking a meal for them. Schreiter observes that in this action Jesus combines table fellowship with hospitality.¹⁸¹ Not only does Jesus cook for them, but serves them that which is familiar to fisherman, fish. He also allows them to contribute to the meal from their work, affirming their value and contribution.

In this first part of the story, Schreiter identifies the first two steps in a methodology of a ministry of reconciliation being used by Jesus. The first step is the **accompanying** of victims and the second is the **providing of hospitality**. The accompaniment is seen in the initiative of Jesus to go to those whose lives had been tossed into chaos by the event of his death and their failure, as yet, to grasp the significance of the resurrection. He listens to them and, as it were, “meets them where they are.” Hospitality is seen in that Jesus has found a way to make this encounter a safe place for the disciples, especially for Simon Peter, who had denied him. This is an important moment in a ministry of reconciliation in that it creates “the atmosphere of trust which makes human communication possible again.”¹⁸²

The narrative continues with Jesus engaging Simon Peter in conversation; there is Jesus' threefold questioning of Peter's love for him and Peter's affirmation. Jesus' surprising response to Peter's answers is to instruct Peter to “Feed my lambs.” It is this

¹⁸⁰ Schreiter, *Ministry of Reconciliation*, 84.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 87.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, 88.

remarkable exchange that Schreiter identifies the remaining two steps in Jesus' method of ministry: **reconnecting** Peter to himself (Jesus) and to the community; and the **commissioning** of Simon Peter.

In giving Simon Peter the opportunity to affirm his love for Jesus, Jesus gave him a chance to express his sorrow and counter the three fold denial that was Peter's shameful part in the passion narrative of Jesus. In accepting the love of Peter, the love of Jesus for Simon Peter was reaffirmed and their relationship was restored. And in the command to "feed my sheep," Simon Peter was returned to right relationship with the community of the faithful as he is restored to his role as shepherd of the flock of Christ.¹⁸³

To briefly summarize, we see in this ritual of a dialogue and the sharing of a meal, an act of reconciliation that restores communion. Again, this communion gets configured along the "vertical" and "horizontal" relationships-- between Simon Peter and the risen Lord; and between Simon Peter and his fellow believers in the community of the Faithful.

In his comments on this ministry of Jesus, Schreiter observes that the first two steps, accompaniment and hospitality, are places where the Christian community can be proactive in their ministerial response to conflict and the promotion of reconciliation. He writes: "Learning how to accompany, and learning how to create through hospitality an environment of trust, kindness and safety are disciplines that can be studied, practiced and learned."¹⁸⁴

Creating communities of reconciliation

It is interesting to note that for Schreiter, this is more than the skill development of an individual, rather it is part of the creation of communities of reconciliation, which

¹⁸³ Ibid., 90-91.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., 94.

becomes the locus of the ministry of reconciliation. He says that these communities of reconciliation have three important and related aspects.¹⁸⁵

The first is that they are communities of safety. Those who have been victimized need to have a safe place where they are able to explore their wounds. As a place of safety, the reconciling community is the antithesis of the place of violence. For the victim, this safety is a necessary condition for the restoration of trust and is a sign that the violence that they have experienced has ended and will not resume.

Secondly, communities of reconciliation are communities of memory. Here memories can be recovered and the possibility is presented that those memories may be understood within the framework of the Paschal Mystery. In situations where the need is for social reconciliation, the community of reconciliation can be a safe place where the people can come to arrive at a common memory of the past. “Communities of memory are also places where we learn again to speak the truth.”¹⁸⁶ The telling of truth is necessary for the narrative of the lie to be refuted and for the people to re-tell the true narratives which reclaim their identity.

Finally, communities of reconciliation need to be communities of hope. It is here that the victims of violence can move beyond the day to day survival and come to experience a culture of hope where a future can be envisioned. “As with communities of memory, communities of hope work to build a common future in which all are safe, justice is done, and the truth is told.”¹⁸⁷

While the initial two phases in the reconciliation ministry of Jesus, accompaniment and hospitality can be achieved through human endeavor, Schreier

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., 94-95.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., 95.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., 95.

clearly asserts that the latter two, the reconnection and the commissioning, reside solely in the action of God.¹⁸⁸ For many, the experience of reconciliation and healing happens upon the person as an unexpected event, an outpouring of divine benevolence and grace.

Schreiter writes:

As ministers of reconciliation we can only mediate in indirect ways those connections and commissions; we do not create them. The spirituality needed for reconciliation is best developed in the learning to wait and listen that marks good accompaniment. We may end up helping the restored victims identify connections and commissions, but we are not their source.¹⁸⁹

A Sociological Framework: Reconciliation and Conflict Transformation

The work of John Paul Lederach has been that as peacemaker and educator. He has extensive experience in working for peace in situations of war and large scale societal conflict. From that work, he has drawn upon his sociological training to develop an integrated framework to guide that work.¹⁹⁰ It is not within the scope of this paper to present that complete sociological framework which informs his praxis of peacemaking in situation of large scale social conflict. However, within that conceptual framework is an understanding of reconciliation which is relevant to the pastoral concern of this paper. I will begin this section by outlining Lederach concept of reconciliation; secondly, I will describe a related, yet distinct, framework of conflict transformation; and finally I will

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., 95-96.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., 96.

¹⁹⁰ The source for a complete account of this framework is found in John Paul Lederach, *Building Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies* (Washington, DC: United States Institute for Peace, 1997).

present Lederach's concept of the moral imagination as an important capacity in the praxis of reconciliation.¹⁹¹

1) *Reconciliation*

The foundational activity of reconciliation is the building of relationships.¹⁹²

Two relevant assumptions are contained in such an understanding. The first is:

that *relationship* is the basis of both the conflict and its long-term solution. ... This approach, though simple in its orientation, has wide-ranging ramifications: Reconciliation is not pursued by seeking innovative ways as to disengage or minimize the conflicting groups' affiliations, but instead is built on mechanisms that engage the sides of a conflict with each other as humans-in-relationship.¹⁹³

An important part of this understanding is that social systems must be looked at as a whole and the various parts are understood in terms of their relationships within that whole system. Lederach uses the image of a spider web to illustrate this interconnectedness.¹⁹⁴

Secondly, reconciliation requires that the mutual exclusion of the "other" which is a result of conflict, must be broken down so as to create an encounter between the parties in conflict. "People need opportunity and space to express to and with another the trauma of loss and their grief at the time of the loss, and the anger that accompanies the pain and the memory of the injustice experienced."¹⁹⁵ For Lederach, the acknowledging that comes from having their story heard, validates the experience and the feelings that accompany the experience and is a first step toward the restoration of the person and the

¹⁹¹ It can be noted that this progression mirrors the chronological development of Lederach writings.

¹⁹² Lederach, *Building Peace*, 23.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*, 26.

¹⁹⁴ The use of the web image is found primarily in his later work on conflict transformation.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 26.

relationship. At the same time, he writes that the encounter can not be just about the memory of the past events, but must also include a way of envisioning a shared future.¹⁹⁶

In regard to this encounter, Lederach creates an interesting image by describing reconciliation as being a place; specifically, the place of encounter where the past can meet the future. “Reconciliation is a locus, a place where people and things come together.”¹⁹⁷ In a like manner, he identifies the locus of reconciliation as a place where justice, truth, peace and mercy come together. Lederach identifies this image as arising out of the use of Psalm 85 in a peace process in Nicaragua; the English translation of Spanish text used (verse 85:10) being: “Truth and mercy have met together; peace and justice have kissed.”¹⁹⁸ In a later work, this image was developed into a narrative, called “The Meeting,” that I have found useful in my ministry of reconciliation.¹⁹⁹

Lederach summarizes his understanding of reconciliation in this way:

Reconciliation...is focused on building relationship between antagonists. The relational dimension involves the emotional and psychological aspects of the conflict and the need to recognize past grievances and explore future interdependence. Reconciliation as a locus creates a space for the encounter by the parties, a place where the diverse but connected energies and concerns driving the conflict can meet, including the paradoxes of truth, mercy, justice and peace.

Reconciliation as a concept and praxis endeavors to reframe the conflict so that the parties are no longer preoccupied with focusing on the issues in a direct, cognitive manner. Its primary goal and key contribution is to seek innovative ways to create time and a place, within the various levels of affected population, to address, integrate and embrace the painful

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., 26-27.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., 29.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., 28.

¹⁹⁹ The full text of “The Meeting” and the history of its inspiration can be found in John Paul Lederach, *The Journey Towards Reconciliation* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1999), Chapter 4. The image is also utilized in a training exercise included in Caritas Internationalis, *Building Peace: A Caritas Training Manual* (Vatican City: Caritas Internationalis, 2002), 41. The purpose of the exercise is to help participants identify how conflicts sometimes arise out of the emphasis placed on different values. It is this resource that I have frequently modified and used in my own ministry.

past and the necessary shared future as a means of dealing with the present.²⁰⁰

2) *Conflict Transformation*

Lederach makes another contribution to the foundational theory underlying the praxis of reconciliation through a framework that he calls conflict **transformation**. This is in specific juxtaposition to the more commonly used phrases of conflict **management** or conflict **resolution**. The change in language represents a significant shift in the approach of responding to conflict. It is a move away from an approach that seeks to “merely” resolve a particular issue. Rather, it views conflict as an opportunity for engagement in constructive change efforts that seek to build healthy relationships and communities.²⁰¹

Lederach offers this definition: “Conflict transformation is to envision and respond to the ebb and flow of social conflict as life-giving opportunities for creating constructive change processes that reduce violence, increase justice, in direct interaction and social structures, and respond to real-life problems in human relationships.”²⁰²

As such, conflict transformation is more than a set of techniques, it is a set of lenses for viewing conflict, while recognizing in conflict the opportunity to create a response that can construct a new and better personal and social situation.²⁰³ Lederach identifies three such lenses. First, is the need to see the immediate situation and secondly, is the need to see beyond the presenting problem to a deeper pattern of relationship. Lederach calls these two lenses the episode and the epicenter of the conflict.

²⁰⁰ Lederach, *Building Peace*, 34-35.

²⁰¹ John Paul Lederach, *The Little Book of Conflict Transformation* (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 2003), 4-5.

²⁰² *Ibid.*, 14.

²⁰³ *Ibid.*, 9.

An *episode* of conflict is the visible expression of conflict rising within the relationship or system, usually within a distinct time frame. It generates attention and energy around the particular set of issues that need response. The *epicenter* of conflict is the web of relational patterns, often providing a history of lived episodes, from which new episodes and issues emerge.²⁰⁴

The third lens that conflict transformation provides is a conceptual framework that helps to connect the episodes and epicenters of the conflict.²⁰⁵ Lederach constructs this analytical framework through inquiry into the personal, relational, structural and cultural dimensions of the conflict. “In the broadest terms, the transformation framework comprises three inquires: The presenting situation, the horizon of preferred future, and the development of change processes linking the two.”²⁰⁶

In summary, several points present within Lederach’s framework of conflict transformation are worth highlighting:

1. Conflict is viewed as an opportunity to bring about a transformation of a conflicted social situation, creating one which reflects a peace that is based on justice.
2. The focus of the inquiry and the intervention is on the human relationships and the web of relationships present within the social system in conflict.
3. The starting point of such an intervention and the design of constructive social change processes is an analysis of the personal, relational, structural and cultural aspects of the conflict.

²⁰⁴ Ibid., 31.

²⁰⁵ Ibid., 10-11.

²⁰⁶ Ibid., 38. The specific application of this broad framework is beyond the scope of this paper, but can be found in the text cited.

4. “Conflict transformation suggests that a fundamental way to promote constructive change on all these levels is dialogue.”²⁰⁷
5. The change process must simultaneously respond to the episode and epicenter of the conflict.

3) *Moral Imagination*

Another point which is important in understanding Lederach’s conceptual framework of reconciliation and which can serve to transition into the next section on praxis is his concept of the moral imagination.

In his recent work, there is a shift in Lederach’s writing as he shares his own inner musing and reflections on his years of experience in peace building. In some ways, he seems to be stepping out of the constraints of his sociological discipline to express a more personal, artistic and theological perspective. In *The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace*, Lederach reflects on the question: “Is building peace an art or a skill?”²⁰⁸ The answer which he develops through this text is that it must be both. This is in contrast to what he has seen (and helped create) in the developing profession of conflict resolution and peacebuilding which is oriented towards technique and the management of the process. Without wanting to negate the need for skill and technique, he writes, “We must envision our work as a creative act, more akin to the artistic endeavor than the technical process.”²⁰⁹ What is needed he calls our moral imagination, which he defines as:

²⁰⁷ Ibid., 21.

²⁰⁸ John Paul Lederach, *The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), ix.

²⁰⁹ Ibid., ix.

To imagine responses and initiatives that, while rooted in the challenges of the real world, are by their nature capable of rising above destructive patterns and giving birth to that which does not yet exist. In reference to peacebuilding, this is the capacity to imagine and generate constructive responses and initiatives that, while rooted in the day-to-day challenges of violent settings, transcend and ultimately break the grip of those destructive patterns and cycles.²¹⁰

Quite simply, no peace is possible until we are able to imagine the possibility of peace and to begin to envision how that peace can be constructed in the web of relationship which are now marked by conflict. To draw upon a familiar story to illustrate, in his famous “I Have a Dream” speech, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. raised a prophetic voice which presented a vision which became for many, the motivation for working to create a society with racial equality.²¹¹

Lederach points to four disciplines or pathways that can assist in the birth of such an imagination. The first is based on the fundamental truth: “Who we have been, are, and will be emerges and shapes itself in the context of relational interdependency.”²¹² Peacemaking and the work of reconciliation requires that we see the centrality of relationships. In a situation of violence or conflict, there needs to be a recognition that all choices and behaviors effect others and have consequences which construct the pattern of relationships; this requires “taking personal responsibility and acknowledging relational mutuality.”²¹³ As “we move from isolation ... towards a capacity to envision and act on

²¹⁰ Ibid., 182.

²¹¹ Full text and video and audio of the “I Have A Dream” speech can be found at: <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkihavedream.htm>

²¹² Lederach, *Moral Imagination*, 35.

²¹³ Ibid., 35.

the basis that we live in and form a part of a web of interdependent relationships, which includes our enemy.”²¹⁴

A second capacity which fosters the birth of the moral imagination is to have a paradoxical curiosity. “The gift of paradox provides an intriguing capacity. It holds together seemingly contradictory truths in order to locate a greater truth.”²¹⁵ Curiosity fuels the inquiry of the mind into that which is not readily apparent or understood.

*“Paradoxical curiosity approaches social realities with an abiding respect for complexity, a refusal to fall prey to the pressures of forced dualistic categories of truth and an inquisitiveness about what may hold seemingly contradictory social energies into a greater whole. This is not primarily a thrust towards finding the common ground based on a narrowly shared denominator. Paradoxical curiosity seeks something beyond what is visible, something that holds apparently contradictory and even violently opposed social energies together.”*²¹⁶

Closely linked to a paradoxical curiosity is the ability to suspend judgment; not to forfeit one’s opinion or the need to assess, rather as an attitude that refuses to accept apparent contradictions at face value or to allow those apparent contradictions to lead to the dualistic thinking which is often at the root of conflict. Instead the imagination is stimulated to seek an understanding that can hold the apparent contradictions and bridge the polarities that they represent.²¹⁷

The third “key discipline that gives rise to the moral imagination is the provision of space for the creative act to emerge.”²¹⁸ Providing space for the

²¹⁴ Ibid., 173.

²¹⁵ Ibid., 36.

²¹⁶ Ibid., 36.

²¹⁷ Ibid., 37.

²¹⁸ Ibid., 38.

creative act means having an attitude or a predisposition that believes that creativity is possible. Lederach writes:

Below and above, outside and beyond the narrow walls with which violence wishes to enclose our human community, we must live with the trust that creativity, divinely embedded in the human spirit, is always within reach. Like a seed in the ground, creative capacity lies dormant, filled with the potential that can give rise to the unexpected blossoms that create the turning points and sustains constructive change.²¹⁹

Here Lederach likens the moral imagination with the creativity of an artist. Just as an artist is able to see that which is not yet and to give birth to a new creation, a peace maker must trust the divinely given creative capacity within the human spirit if they are to inquiry into the situations of violence and conflict and imagine a way to move beyond the grip of violence and give birth to a new creation; a vision in which the future is not a slave to the past.²²⁰

Finally, the discipline that is at the essence of the moral imagination is the willingness to take a risk. “To risk is to step into the unknown without an guarantee of success or even safety.”²²¹ In situations of war or conflict, peace is the elusive mystery which requires the acceptance of vulnerability and uncertainty.

Accepting vulnerability, we must risk the step into the unknown and unpredictable lands and seek constructive engagement with those people and things we least understand and most fear. We must take up the inevitably perilous but absolutely necessary

²¹⁹ Ibid., 173

²²⁰ Ibid., 39.

²²¹ Ibid., 39.

journey that makes it way back to humanity and the building of genuine community.²²²

While that brief conceptual picture is incomplete, I now turn to some ways that Lederach's work adds to the praxis of reconciliation.

Contribution to praxis

In *The Journey Towards Reconciliation*, Lederach writes about the praxis of reconciliation as he reflects on his own ministry of reconciliation. Interesting, one section of this work deals specifically with my own pastoral concern, the need for reconciliation within a church. In this he reveals an approach that is guided equally by sociological and theological perspectives.

The story Lederach tells is of working with a congregation from his own Anabaptist Mennonite denomination.²²³ He observes somewhat wryly, that while the Anabaptists have long held a "peace" stance, their history is full of conflict. Unfortunately, this identifies a commonality in all Christian denominations. He begins by noting that within churches, conflict is often thought of as sin. The belief seems to be that "if everyone just did what they were suppose to do, we wouldn't have this problem." As a sociologist he notes that the culture of most churches is not conducive to conflict transformation. Instead, often the operative culture is to avoid speaking of conflict; be nice; avoid confrontation; etc. He then presents an analysis of the effects or changes that conflict can have on a church if it is not dealt with effectively.

²²² Ibid., 173.

²²³ Lederach, *Journey Towards Reconciliation*, 99-104.

The pattern that he sees when a church is not able to effectively deal with conflict is one of escalation.²²⁴ First the conflict becomes personalized as we tend to identify the problem with the other individuals with whom we are in conflict. We might ask the other: “What is your problem?” They often respond to such perceived attacks by raising new issues which they can use to confront us. This moves into a blaming game where the conflict becomes more personalized as we get more explicit in the accusation of blame for the cause of the conflict. As the conflict escalates, the language often becomes more and more general as we lose sight of the original issue. Now the conflict has become polarized as a conflict between “us” and “them,” We then talk less with the other group, instead we talk about them within our own group. We talk almost exclusively with the people that agree with us as the boundaries and differences between “us” the and “them” gets solidified. The conflict can take on a negative spiraling effect as we react to the latest outrage committed by the other side and we move even farther from the original presenting issue. In the worse case scenario, we decided that we are too different from them to remain in the same church. While describing this pattern in one brief paragraph may seem a harsh caricature, my own lived experieince would support the validity of this general pattern.

For a ministry of reconciliation that responds to conflict within a church, Lederach goes to the scripture. However, his use of the scripture is not strictly exegetical, in the theological sense of the word. Rather it is more of a social analysis of the pattern of interaction that he observes in the passages. He develops two similar but distinct models of ministry of reconciliation through his readings of Matthew 18 and Acts 15.

²²⁴ Ibid., 104-109.

Gospel of Matthew- Chapter 18

Lederach writes that, “Matthew 18 is a chapter about conflicts.”²²⁵ He notes that it begins with the disciples squabbling about who is the greatest and ends with a parable about money and payment schedules. In the middle, we find the passage on “fraternal” correction (vs.15-20). Because of the context of this chapter, Lederach purports that this passage is primarily about working for reconciliation. “We are called to work for the restoration and healing of people and their relationships.”²²⁶ Lederach reads this passage as practical guidance for the work of reconciliation and he outlines a pattern of that ministry in four steps.²²⁷

*Step 1: Go Directly*²²⁸

The first step may seem obvious, but it is to go directly to the one with whom I am in conflict and to speak directly with them about the disagreement. While obvious, it is often the step which many are unable to do. It requires that the person not only have acquire good self awareness through their self-reflection, but to have the prayerful vulnerability that leads to a spiritual discernment that allows them to then turn towards the other and engage them in a non-defensive manner. This “vulnerable transparency”²²⁹ requires a spiritual maturity.

²²⁵ Ibid., 119.

²²⁶ Ibid., 121.

²²⁷ Ibid., 123-136.

²²⁸ Each of these italicized headings are the same as used by Lederach in *Journey Towards Reconciliation*.

²²⁹ Ibid., 125.

Step 2: Taking One or Two Witnesses Along

Contrary to the more typical reading of this passage which would suggest that the witness are to offer collaborating testimony of the wrong that has been committed in the conflict or to arbitrate a settlement, Lederach reads this as a call to create a forum for the work of reconciliation. As indicated in step one, the primary responsibility for reconciliation rests on those who are engaged in the conflict. Therefore, the witnesses are needed to create a body of people or forum, which I would call a community, to help “discern what is happening and what needs to be done.”²³⁰ They are witnesses, not to the situation of conflict, but to the possibility of reconciliation.

Where “two or three are gathered” (18:18-20) has both practical and spiritual aspects. “On the practical side, this step concerns the development of capacities and skills that help create the safe place for people to be transparent and interact with each other. The spiritual dimension means that this kind of space is holy ground. It represent the place where we encounter God and each other.”²³¹

Step 3: Telling It to the Church

Like step two, this activity is to shift the forum and to bring the conflict to the even broader forum of the church. Again, the responsibility for the conflict rests on those directly engaged in the conflict, while the church is to provide the assistance needed for that conflict to be addressed. For Lederach this step affirms that working on conflict is a spiritual activity and reconciliation is the mission of the church. He summarizes the spiritual dimension of “telling it to the church” as:

²³⁰ Ibid., 128.

²³¹ Ibid., 130.

The people who make up the church and its very structure are living testimonies of working out the mission of reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:18-19). The church is a place of encounter. It is a place of Truth-discerning and Truth-telling. It is a place for vulnerable transparency. It is a place for interactive engagement. It is a place for accountability. It is, after all, a place where we journey towards each other and towards God.²³²

Step 4: Relating as with a Gentile and Tax Collector

Lederach observes that the usual interpretation of this instruction in Matthew is to read it as a mandate to avoid the sinner. However, Lederach relies on a simple theological principle of discipleship, which is to follow in the footsteps of Jesus by doing what Jesus did, thus he asks: “How did Jesus related to Gentiles and Tax Collectors?” The answers is: Jesus ate with them; with all the implications of observing table fellowship in that culture. To eat with another was to establish or maintain a relationship. So, even if all else fails and the one in need of fraternal correction rejects the call to conversion and the discipline of the church, Jesus says to remain in relationship. Lederach continues by observing that in these relationships, we follow the example of Jesus if we are able to:

- define ourselves without projection or retreat; accepting vulnerable transparency and encouraging it in others;
- foster a non-anxious presence that is able to accept that others will define themselves differently and that we are able to engage those differences; and
- maintain the relationship and remain emotionally connected. Stay at table together.²³³

²³² Ibid., 132.

²³³ Ibid., 135.

Acts of the Apostles- Chapter 15

Acts 15 is the story of the so called Council of Jerusalem. The early Christian community was engaged in a serious and important conflict and was trying to handle it. The episode of conflict was that some were wanting to require that the Gentile converts in Antioch observe the Mosaic law. The epicenter of the conflict involved issues of identity and belonging and the long standing pattern of mutual exclusion and separation. Again, Lederach analyzes the interaction of the characters in the text to identify six principles and steps for handling conflict in the life of the early church community.²³⁴

*1) Recognize and define the problem*²³⁵

The important first step in the handling of conflict is to acknowledge the problem and to arrive at a common understanding of that problem. At the Council of Jerusalem, the problem or conflict was out in the open and brought to the attention of the community. This acknowledgment of the problem is an important truth telling activity and it is one that many communities find difficult. Often communities fear that acknowledging a conflict will lead to a separation or will damage the relationship. In Lederach's experience, the opposite is often the case.²³⁶ When the conflict is not acknowledged, it tends to fester under the surface until it gains enough emotional energy to come to the surface in a larger and more emotional conflict. As such, the fear that discourages acknowledgment and the engagement with others in a conflict becomes a self-fulfilling outcome.

²³⁴ Ibid., 143-150.

²³⁵ Again, each of these italicized headings are the same as used by Lederach in *Journey Towards Reconciliation*.

²³⁶ Ibid., 144.

2) *Create the appropriate forum for processing matters*

As he noted in his commentary on Matthew 18, here too it is necessary to address the issue or conflict in the appropriate setting. In the case of Acts 15, the appropriate forum was the church of Jerusalem, which was the community from which the missionaries had come who wanted to impose the Mosaic law on the converts in Antioch.

3) *Let diverse viewpoints be represented*

The Council of Jerusalem was an inclusive gathering; various viewpoints were represented and presented to the assembly. We can read that there was “much discussion” (15:7). Leaders like James and Peter spoke, but clearly the discussion was not limited to them. We can also read that those who had raised objection to the practices of the Gentile community in Antioch, “fell silent” (15:12) and listened to Paul and Barnabas.

4) *Document diversity*

This step follows closely on the previous. Lederach writes that giving everyone a chance to speak is referred to in the mediation field as documenting diversity.²³⁷ The assumption is that everyone has the opportunity to speak, but also that everyone listens closely. In an emotional situation of conflict, the listening is often an overlooked requirement. In the context of community, creating the social space for people to talk and to listen, also may include the needed silence for listening to God.

²³⁷ Ibid., 147.

5) *Use the gifts of the community*

When the appropriate forum is in place and the principle of inclusivity is being observed, then the gifts of the community can be brought to bear in the handling of the conflict. In the story in Acts 15 we can see that:

Some bring evidence of what they have seen from their ministry. Some speak of the past. Some speak of how God has worked among them. Some interpret biblical text. Some formulate ideas of how things will be brought together. Some move the meeting towards a specific outcome. Some write the outcome down. Some carry the message to those not present.²³⁸

The gifts of the whole community were needed and utilized. Here Lederach refers to the Pauline image of the church as being a body. “It is a powerful vision that values diversity and seeks common purpose and understanding. Acts 15 describes how that works through the creation of a forum that provides for diversity and seeks common understanding.”²³⁹

6) *Decide, then implement decisions*

A striking part of the story is that there is a firm conclusion. A compromise decision was reached and the implementation of the decision was put in place. It was a decision that set the course for the future of the Church, by recognizing that the Spirit was about something new, yet also maintained that which was of value in the past. In this framework for handling conflict, the principle that Lederach is identifying is not that compromise is the solution; rather he is accentuating that in our response to conflict, the praxis has to lead to a decision that can be implemented.

²³⁸ Ibid., 148.

²³⁹ Ibid., 149.

Conclusion

In my ministry of reconciliation, I have long used a synthesis of the works of Robert Schreiter and John Paul Lederach. I have discovered that they have much in common and that their differences are more a result of the emphasis demanded by their academic discipline, than a divergence of thought. In this conclusion I will list some essential commonalities that I find in their understanding of reconciliation and will also highlight some differences, while claiming elements that I think are essential to a practical theology of reconciliation. In this I will integrate both theory and considerations of praxis.

In general, as a theologian Schreiter provides a clearer and more complete articulation of a theological understanding of reconciliation. Lederach is more the practitioner and he arrives at what could be considered a similar theological position, but does so through his reflection on his peacemaking experience. For Lederach, there has been a development of thought in his work, from a more strictly sociological perspective and praxis, toward one that is more explicitly grounded in his faith life and theological beliefs.

For both authors, their understanding of reconciliation flows from a Christological perspective that equates the life and mission of Jesus with the mission of reconciliation. Schreiter provides the better articulation of this concept as foundational for his development of a Christian spirituality of reconciliation. While only elements of that framework are echoed in the work of Lederach, I find nothing in his work to think that that he would not accept the five distinctive characteristics of a Christian spirituality of reconciliation found in Schreiter's writings.

Building on this Christological foundation, Schreiter makes an important assertion about the “vertical” and “horizontal” dimensions of reconciliation. Lederach is less explicit in making that linkage, but in his writing on the vocation of peacemaking, he is clearly of like mind.²⁴⁰ Here their difference may be one of emphasis. Schreiter frames reconciliation within the broader narrative of the paschal mystery, while Lederach approaches it more practically within the methodologies of praxis that he offers. In this Schreiter is asserting the place of God as the primary agent of reconciliation, hence the importance he places on the vertical axis and the need for a spirituality to guide the actions of ministers of reconciliation. Lederach is guided by a social construction orientation and leans towards an emphasis along the horizontal axis and the construction of the “new creation.” While different, these two positions are more complimentary than contrary and are certainly not mutually exclusive.

Both see conflict as an opportunity to encounter God and to create a more just situation. As a sociologist, Lederach places a high value on the need to analyze the conflict within the social system and to identify causes as a starting point in praxis. Especially in his earlier work,²⁴¹ he develops a highly detailed process for analyzing conflict and pursuing a peacemaking goal. On a less technical level, his later work on conflict transformation, especially the need to recognize and distinguish between the episodes and epicenters of the conflict, I have found to be useful in my ministry.

Both Schreiter and Lederach present reconciliation as a process and a goal. The goal arises out of their acceptance of the preaching of Jesus and in their praxis to arrive at

²⁴⁰ See especially Lederach, *Journey Towards Reconciliation*, Part Three- The Call to Reconciliation.

²⁴¹ See here *Building Peace*. In that work his concern is large scale global conflict, and as such, it is less applicable to my own pastoral concern.

that goal, both outline methodologies that are processes. In this, both place the emphasis on the restoration of relationships.

In their commendations for praxis, neither Schreiter or Lederach claim to be presenting a “how to” manual. Schreiter offers a reflection on the Jesus’ ministry of reconciliation, developed from an exegesis of the post-resurrection appearance narratives. This simple methodological framework emphasizes the need for the pastoral accompaniment of victims of injustice as a means of allowing them to come to a place where they can experience the healing power of God. The “how” of that healing is attributed to the grace of God and the specifics of that ministry of accompaniment is not highly developed. However, the importance of community in the work of reconciliation is highlighted as providing the space of safety and hope where the victim is able to share the narratives and memories of the trauma that they have experienced. “Somehow” in the telling and retelling of the narrative, the victim comes to remember the trauma in a new way and can be brought to a new and restored identity by God.

Because of its focus on large scale global conflict and a detailed sociological approach, I have found the praxis contained in Lederach’s *Building Peace* to be unhelpful in addressing my pastoral concern. Simply, I find the framework is too complex to adapt in my ministerial setting. However, his more recent work, which address a more familiar context, has much to offer and in these recommendation for praxis he has much in common with Schreiter. He also offers an approach that places the work of reconciliation within the activity of a faith community. In a similar way, he recognizes the need for victims to give voice to the injustice that they have encountered and the trauma or source of conflict is a primary focus for the work. They both articulate an approach that

addresses the conflict directly through truth telling. As previously noted, he differs from Schreiter in recommending a more practical guide for responding to the conflict and for creating a more peaceful and just situation. While not a “how to” manual, the two models of ministry that he developed through his reflections on Matthew 18 and Act 15, offer some clear sign posts for the journey to reconciliation.

In his most recent work, Lederach has distanced himself from the more technical aspects of his previous methodology and has explored the artistic aspects of the ministry. In some way, this brings him more in line with Schreiter assertion that the work of reconciliation is more spirituality than a strategy. With the concept of the moral imagination, Lederach has introduced what seems to be an important idea, however its practical implications for a praxis of reconciliation has yet to be effectively articulated.

Chapter 5

Is Appreciative Inquiry an effective strategy for promoting reconciliation and the restoration of communion in an ecclesial setting?

In Chapter 2 I told the story of the AI process that we carried out in an ecclesial setting, St. Agatha Catholic Church. After each of the three parish sessions, I met with the core team to discuss the previous parish session. In keeping with the theory of AI, these discussions were more valuation than evaluation.²⁴² In these discussions, the core team expressed their appreciation for the AI process and for the positive effect that it was having on the parish. As a process, it was clearly successful as a means of planning and articulating a vision for the future of the parish. However, my investigation in this thesis-project was not to assess the value of AI for organizational planning and development. Rather, as stated in the thesis question used as the heading for this chapter, my investigation is concerned with the possible place that AI may have in a praxis of reconciliation to assist a faith community respond to conflict or other disruption in their communion. It is to that specific question that I now turn.

This chapter will unfold as follows. To begin I will return to the thoughts expressed by the core team. In the final meeting with them (October 9, 2007), following the valuation of the final parish session, I asked the core team to reflect with me on the AI process as a whole. For this, I stepped away from the “only focus on the positive”

²⁴² See page 54 for a brief explanation of this distinction.

requirement of valuation in AI theory, and asked specific questions which invited the core team to think critically about the overall process experience. This section will be a narrative of that discussion and will include their subjective opinions of the effect of the AI process on the parish. In this narrative I will use the questions that I asked as headings and will present their responses.²⁴³ The second part of this chapter will be my own theological reflections on the process, utilizing the understanding of communion ecclesiology presented in Chapter 3 and the understanding of reconciliation presented in Chapter 4. In my reflection, I will make frequent connections to the narrative in Chapter 2 and the reflections of the core team contained in the narrative below. In the third part of this chapter I will shift my focus to the praxis of reconciliation, reflecting on the process at St. Agatha and the appropriateness of AI in the praxis of reconciliation.

Reflections of the core team

The core team knew that my involvement with the AI process at St. Agatha was part of a Doctor of Ministry research project. Before we began the process, they knew that I would be asking them to reflect with me on the process and to evaluate its place in a praxis of reconciliation, with the hope that we could create a useful model that would add to the praxis of reconciliation. As a prelude to this discussion, I told them that I wanted them to help me look at the “before” and “after” picture of St. Agatha. I said that my hope was to get a sense of what they thought and believed about the process and the effect of the process on the parish; that it was important that they simply told me their “truth” and not try to tell me what they thought I would want to hear or what they thought

²⁴³ I did not make an audio recording of this discussion with the core team, but I took careful notes. In my presentation of their responses, I will frequently paraphrase their reply, being carefully faithful to their comments. When I place their response in quotations marks, it is a direct quote that I recorded in my notes. To honor anonymity, I normally will not cite the name of the person being quoted.

might benefit my research. Recognizing that the presence of a researcher always influences a response, I am reasonably confident that they tried to respond in such a manner. The discussion was animated and all seemed both thoughtful and forthright in their replies.

How would you compare St. Agatha before and after? What has been the effect of the process on the community of St. Agatha? How is St Agatha different because of the work we have done?

The first core team member to respond identified herself as a former parishioner of Blessed Sacrament Church.²⁴⁴ She said that before the process, the members of her former parish felt disconnected from St. Agatha, but now they feel connected. Everyone knows each other better. She said, “This was a new beginning for the parish and we were a part of defining that so now this is **our** parish”. Another member of the core team that was from one of the closed parishes said it clearly, “A big change is that now people feel like this is their Church.”

Others echoed the theme of church ownership and involvement. Several spoke of the way that the youth of the parish were given “voice” and how they used that voice to express a desire to be more integrally involved in the life of the church. Young adult

²⁴⁴ The current St. Agatha Church is a consolidation of four parishes. As part of a Archdiocese of Chicago pastoral planning process, in 2004, 10 Westside parishes were consolidated into 4 parishes. Blessed Sacrament Church, Our Lady of Lourdes, and Presentation Church, which had previously been in a cluster with St. Agatha, were now closed and they became a part of St. Agatha. I was aware that there was still “unfinished” effects of that merger because in one of the initial meetings that I had with the St. Agatha parish leadership team, this core team member said that for her the need for reconciliation at St. Agatha was not the effects of Fr. McCormack’s actions. Rather, her sense of a need for reconciliation was that the parishioners from the closed parishes were not yet equal members of St. Agatha. This was her feeling, even though she was on the parish council and was widely involved in the life of the parish. At the time, my response to her was that the AI process did not require that we identify and analyze the problems, rather the focus was going to be on the positive core of the parish and the dreams for the future. For that reason, I said the value of AI is that all issues and sources of conflict will get addressed, but will get addressed from the side of the “solution.”

participants in the process said that they wanted more active participation in the life of the parish and the process gave them the opportunity to express that and to define that participation. As one person said, “Finally, young people were being asked to participate and they are excited to have the opportunity to make a contribution.” Another spoke of the “former bench warmers” saying that many parishioners who were previously “only come to Mass parishioners” were engaged throughout the process and have also made commitments to greater future participation.

In speaking of St. Agatha “before,” some noted that there was a lack of focus; “Now we are more focused and have a road map to go forward.” Another added, “Before we were doing OK, but we were just maintaining. This process freed us up to move forward.” A third team member said. “For a long time we were just going through the motions, waiting for the next shoe to drop; the next tragedy to be reported. We supported each other, but we didn’t really know what to do about what was being revealed.”

Finally, some spoke of the spiritual nature or foundation of the process citing past efforts that failed. One said, “We tried town hall meetings in the past and they didn’t work; nothing came from them. This time we had a spiritual focus; it was a kind of evangelization.” Referring to the church motto of “Being Church, After Church,” another declared that the value of the process was that it helped them to reclaim what it means to “Be Church, **In** Church.”

Can you tell me the effect the process had on the community of St. Agatha? Did it have an effect on how you feel about each other? Did it strengthen the bond you feel; do you feel closer? Are you more united? More like a family? Or is it pretty much the same?

In general, it was the opinion of the core team that the AI process did in fact promote a sense of unity and communion. It needs to be noted that the second topic that the core team chose for the process — We are one: united and strengthened in Christ²⁴⁵ — was specific to the concern of this thesis-project. This topic selection indicates a desire for and the importance that the St. Agatha community places on their relationship with each other and their belief that their relationship with each other is connected to their personal relationships with Christ. They viewed the process as facilitating the opportunity for them to claim ownership of the church. They recognized that through the process of creating a vision of the future, a common identity was established. That shared common identity, created within them a sense of community.

Again it was expressed that this was particularly true for those parishioners from the former cluster or closed parishes. “It brought reconciliation to the cluster churches that joined St. Agatha. We are now equal owners of St. Agatha.” Another, seemingly speaking for all, put it quite succinctly, “We are one now.”

I heard about St. Agatha because of all the publicity about Dan McCormack’s actions and the expressed desire for healing and the desire to move on. Has this process helped the parish to heal?

The short answer to this question was unanimously — Yes! Reflecting on the abuse allegations and the effect that it had on St Agatha, one team member responded to what seemed to be an unspoken question: How could this have happened? He said that sometimes they felt like they had let the Church down because they did not know the abuse was occurring and so did not protect the youth from a pastor that they had trusted.

²⁴⁵ See page 45 to review the topics and the topic selection process.

He said that in large part it was because they had been kept passive; this was the pastor's church and no one even thought to challenge or question his actions. With the AI process at St. Agatha, now the people had a chance to step up and take responsibility and to be involved and claim their church. The implication is that now the people are better able to know what is going on and to protect the children. That sense of empowerment seems to reflect a sense of healing.

The process also seems to have helped the parish put the events of Dan McCormack behind them. By that I mean, his betrayal of trust and the effects of that on the parish no longer has the power to define the parish. Everyone still remembers the events and it will likely remain a part of the parish's self-understanding for a long time, but the event is no longer dominant in their self awareness as a faith community. The process has seemed to help the parish to recognize and use their power to decide their own identity as they move forward together.

Do you know how this process has affected the youth who were abused and their families?

Most of the direct victims of the abuse and their families have severed their involvement in the parish and the school. Fr. Larry continues to offer them pastoral care and individually encourages them to seek counseling or other services that might aid their own healing. One person expressed her discomfort with the amount of public information and discussion about the youth involved. She said that at some point the whole thing becomes voyeuristic and that the privacy of the youth needs to be respected so that they have control over where this is discussed. She felt that it would be inappropriate for the parish to be having public discussions about the specifics of the

abuse. “The process we did helped to make us a strong community that can nurture the victims. It is that way that we respond to them, not by public problem solving of the issue.”

What effect did McCormack’s action have on the parish and did this process have any impact in transforming that?

Someone offered this metaphor in response. “Before, with all that had gone on, we were like a closed up flower. There was good things here; we had blessings, but we were closed up. The process gave us a chance to bloom again.” Another person expressed appreciation of overall purpose that we had selected – Walking in Faith and Moving Forward with Christ. The purpose reflected the desire of the parishioners. No one is denying anymore what McCormack had done or that it was awful. But the church **needed** to move past that to create a future. This theme continued to be expressed in response to the next question.

Some would say that you have to face the problem or hurt head on – That you need to talk about it and analyze what happened; redressing the wrong that was committed; etc. We didn’t do that. This approach was from the other side. Do you think that it is OK that we didn’t speak specifically about Dan McCormack’s betrayal of trust and its effect on the children and the community?

Again the core team was unified in their assertion that parishioners did not want to talk about McCormack and what he did. They noted that not once in the parish sessions did anyone seek to introduce that discussion. The time for that seemed to be past and “people seem to be healing.” There was general agreement that to have made

that the focus of the process would have rendered the process ineffective and most believed that it would have been very difficult to get the level of parish participation that was a key factor in the success of the process we did. One person said gratefully, “This process moved us faster and quicker than trying to talk about what had happened.” And another added, “We had lots of problems before (parish mergers/closings; McCormack, finances, etc) and we were not really facing any of them. Now we faced all the problems, but we did it from the side of the solution. This was a paradigm shift and it helped us.”

Noting that it was now about a year and a half since the allegations against Fr. McCormack had surfaced, I asked the core team about the timing of the process of St. Agatha? Could we or should we have done this sooner?

The group was **adamant** in saying that it would not have been possible to do the AI process much sooner than they did. The parish had needed some time for the emotions to settle and for Fr. Larry to be in place as the pastor. Because there was an interim pastor for a year before Fr. Larry was appointed, I asked the core team if he had been named pastor sooner, could they have done the process sooner? Again, they were adamant that they would have needed about this much time from the abuse allegation to be ready to decide to move forward.²⁴⁶

Other reflections

While not responsive to particular questions posed, other reflections of the core team need to be noted.

There was a very spirited affirmation of the leadership of their pastor, Fr. Larry Dowling. Core team members (who are the lay leaders of the parish) declared that the AI

²⁴⁶ The question of timing is an important praxis consideration and will be addressed in the next chapter.

process allowed his leadership to emerge and it confirmed him as the pastor and parish leader who can help the church move forward. He was recognized as being affirming and inviting. His style of leadership, his spiritual depth and his maturity and humility were all praised. One statement was widely affirmed. “You have given us solid, consistent, un-biased leadership.”²⁴⁷ I find it interesting to note that it was in sharing his authority and leadership, that his leadership and authority as pastor was confirmed.

A religious sister on the core team observed that this process and Fr. Larry’s leadership reflected a shift in the operative ecclesiology of the parish. The church now has shared leadership. Previous leadership was very top-down (pastor controlled) and now the leadership is more participative and the church “ownership” is shared. There is a more participative and open ecclesiology being lived. Someone else said that it feels more democratic and now people are more respected and allowed to have responsibility and participation in decisions. To the core team, the AI process results and the process itself reflects a more desired ecclesiology.²⁴⁸

Shortly after this core team meeting, Sister continued to reflect on leadership and ecclesiology in a follow up communication. Reflecting on the two previous pastors with whom she had worked at St. Agatha, she noted that they probably would have welcomed the ecclesiological shift at St. Agatha that she witnessed through this process, but they lacked the necessary personal and leadership skills to make it happen. She thought that one former pastor would have lacked the patience to commit to such an extensive process. Another would speak the words of inclusivity, but in the end would not be able to relinquish control, which meant that the ideas and opinions of other would not be

²⁴⁷ I will return to the importance of leadership in the next chapter also.

²⁴⁸ I will add my own reflections on this topic in the section to follow.

honored. She wrote, “AI is great in that it give a structure that could lead to something. ...I think that AI is constructed on the assumption that people are willing and capable. So it naturally leads to a model of Church which is inclusive and empowering. The problem for ‘the people’ will always be that it all depends upon who is the pastor of our dear Church.”²⁴⁹

One final reflection comes from a follow up conversation with Fr. Dowling. He noted that he has reflected on this process and the effect it has had on St. Agatha in Eucharistic terms. Observing that in the celebration of Eucharist, bread is blessed, broken and given, he recognizes in AI’s focus on the positive core, a discovery or affirmation of the many ways that the parish and the people of the parish have been blessed. That while the betrayal of trust of their former pastor has been a significant breaking of the community, the process has also given the members of the parish a way to bring the blessings that they have from God and to give them as a gift to the community through a shared vision of the future.

Reconciliation and the restoration of communion

The assessment of the core team of the Appreciative Inquiry process, while subjective, is their clear answer to the thesis question: Yes, AI can be a strategy for reconciliation and it can lead to the restoration of communion in a faith community. Because reconciliation and a sense of communion are essentially private, internal perceptions, their reporting of those perceptions need to be respected and valued.

I share with the core team their assessment that the AI process at St. Agatha was a process of reconciliation and did lead to the restoration or strengthening of communion. I

²⁴⁹ E-mail message to the author. October 17, 2007.

arrive at this conclusion through reflection on the events that I witnessed and experienced through the facilitation of the process.

Reconciliation is, first and foremost, concerned with relationships

The focus of the process at St. Agatha was on the relationships. This is most clearly seen in the topics selected.²⁵⁰ The first topic: **A vibrant and spirit filled church**, was expressive of the relationship that the church desired with God. It reflected the desire to be in “right relationship” with God and for the community of St Agatha, this communal relationship with God found its expression in their Sunday celebration of Eucharist. The second topic: **We are one – united and strengthened in Christ**, can be read as a declaration of the community’s desire for communion. It needs to be noted that while the desire is expressed for a united relationship among the members of the church, they recognize that the path to that unity is through their relationship with Christ. This expression of communion ecclesiology indicates the necessary interconnectedness of the horizontal and vertical relationships that are part of faithfulness for a church.²⁵¹ The third topic: **Being Church, After Church**, directed the focus of the process to an outward or missionary direction. This too, is about right relationship; the right relationship of the Church to the world or the context in which it is situated. The discussion of the parish around this topic was an expression of the desire of the parish to, individually and communally, represent Christ in their neighborhood.

²⁵⁰ See p. 45 for a fuller exploration of the topics.

²⁵¹ I will expand on the idea of St. Agatha being an example of communion ecclesiology below.

Reconciliation is both a goal and a process

In the writings of Schreiter and Lederach, there is agreement that reconciliation must be understood as being both a goal and a process. The theory and practice of AI also recognizes the importance of the process employed being an expression of the desired goal. More than just a theory and process of organizational development, AI is “a way of seeing and being in the world.”²⁵² This is most clearly indicated in AI with the absolute “rule” to maintain the positive core as the focus in the process. Appreciative Inquiry purports that an organization will move towards that about which it most persistently inquires. If you have a positive goal, you must reflect that positive focus in the process employed. In a like way, AI would recognize that if reconciliation within the community is the goal, then the process to pursue that goal must reflect the community acting in a way that embodies a community that is already reconciled. The actions of the community must reflect the stated desire or goal. The AI process at St. Agatha had this type of integrity.

The purpose statement for the St. Agatha process was: **Walking in Faith and Moving Forward with Christ.** That is a statement of both goal and process. As a goal statement it expresses the desire to be faithful to Christ, both individually and communally. It also expresses as a goal the desire of the church to be reconciled and healed from the past events which have fractured their sense of unity and well being. More importantly, through the AI process at St. Agatha, the church was indeed realizing the goal. Through the process, they were acting in faith and they were collectively moving out of the painful events of the past which had created their need for

²⁵² This quote was first used in Chapter 1, p.10, as part of an explanation of the philosophical underpinnings of Appreciative Inquiry.

reconciliation and becoming the reconciled community that they desired to be. In some ways, the goal of the process was achieved in the decision to begin an AI process and the process itself became the opportunity to define the particulars of that new identity and to learn and practice the patterns of behavior that would allow that new identity to be firmly established and sustainable as they continued to journey together as a community of faith.

Reconciliation is both spirituality and strategy

In the theological framework of a Christian spirituality of reconciliation,²⁵³ Robert Schreiter asserts the role of God as the primary agent of reconciliation. It follows therefore, that a ministry of reconciliation needs to be rooted in a spirituality and Schreiter cautions a would-be minister of reconciliation from being too confident or dependent on strategies to bring about reconciliation. This is not to deny the need or place of strategies in a praxis of reconciliation, but to assert that reconciliation depends on God, not on human action.

Appreciative Inquiry asserts a different perspective. While AI theory speaks infrequently about the goal of reconciliation within an organization, it is a very confident strategy. Appreciative Inquiry theory would recognize a church as being a social construct, and as such, its identity and functioning is within the scope of the participants to create and define. AI theory would say: If a church wants to be reconciled, the church can create that reality. However, in AI theory, reconciliation would likely be a sociological, not theological concept.

Appreciative Inquiry theory springs from the secular concern of organizational dynamics. In my research, I found no stated position on religion or theological and

²⁵³ See 101-108.

spiritual belief systems. It can only be projected that AI would only look at “Church” in social and human terms. That said, I think that in the use of AI within an ecclesial setting, the religious beliefs of the participants are respected. Pertinent to the process at St. Agatha, while AI theory would not assert that the church “should” reflect Gospel values, it would assert the ability of the participants in the process to create a church that reflects Gospel values, if that is the goal or the desire of participants. In one sense, while the theory of AI is theologically silent, it does allow the participants to act on their beliefs and the theory resonates with a theology that views the world as a place of grace.

In that sense, while not containing overt statements of theology, an AI process can be an inherently spiritual activity. This was demonstrated in the process at St. Agatha. From the beginning conversations with the core team, the concerns expressed and the motivation for going forward were essentially spiritual. St. Agatha was a church wanting to be faithful; a faithfulness that needed to be expressed in their relationship to both God and one another. This spirituality was not only expressed with the use of religious imagery and action (ritual and prayer), but the process itself was an expression of the spirituality of communion articulated by John Paul II in *Novo Millennio Inuente*.²⁵⁴ The AI process encouraged and provided the opportunity for the parishioners of St. Agatha to demonstrate a great concern for one another. This was beyond an emotional concern for one another. Rather, it reflected an understanding of self that was in solidarity with others as part of one body, one Church. They were hospitable and open to one another throughout the process as people who held each other in genuine respect. In their positive regard of one another, there was an assumption of the giftedness of all and that all had a place within the Church. In this too, the AI process reflected the goal of

²⁵⁴ See p. 88-89 for a further description of this spirituality.

restoring a church to communion, because it provided the structure and framework for the participants to act like a community. The AI process is dependent on the participants working together with openness and respect to achieve a mission or task and the process reinforces that perspective by teaching the skills that can become a sustainable way of maintaining the relationship in the future. For this reason, AI has a strong tendency to contribute to the building of community.

Both Schreiter and Lederach situate the praxis of reconciliation within the Church; within a community of faith.²⁵⁵ Specific to the writings of Schreiter,²⁵⁶ the AI process at St. Agatha created a place of safety, memory and hope. The meetings of the core team and the three sessions of the parish, were filled with honest and respectful dialogue. A spirituality of dialogue was very evident.²⁵⁷ People felt the safety to speak from their hearts and to express their dreams for their church. Together they recalled the best of their past and shared those memories as a means of laying the foundation for building their future together. Together, they created a community of hope in which the negative events of the past lost their hold on defining the identity and future of the community. While AI theory is not presented in the literature as a spiritual exercise, in fact, the engagement of the theory at St. Agatha was a decidedly spiritual strategy for effecting communion and building a community of faith.

Reconciliation is a new creation

Another aspect of the theological understanding of reconciliation as presented by Schreiter, is that reconciliation is not the restoration of the previous situation or

²⁵⁵ Support for this assertion is found in Chapter 4.

²⁵⁶ See p. 111.

²⁵⁷ See p. 91-95 for a treatment of this spirituality.

relationships, rather it results in a new creation. The core team for the AI process at St. Agatha were in universal agreement that the process had resulted in St. Agatha being a new creation. What exactly was that new creation?

Perhaps the most significant effect of the AI process at St. Agatha was that the operative ecclesiology of the parish shifted. In the previous model, the church was marked by a hierarchical leadership in which all considered the “owner” of the church to be the pastor. This created a closed system in which the parishioners were relegated to a passive role. A further characteristic was that there was little dialogue and communication about the concerns and issues that were present. The evidence of this is seen in the reports of the members from the closed parishes who never felt integrated into the life of St. Agatha. It also created the situation where the questionable actions of a pastor (e.g., the unsupervised activity with minors) would not be questioned.

Through the AI process, a new type of parish has been given birth. As members of the core team claimed: The church now belongs to them. They gratefully credit the participative leadership style of their new pastor with making this possible. Today, they willingly accept the responsibility for shared leadership and for the parish as a whole. This shift in ecclesiology can be understood within the framework of communion ecclesiology.

As a foundation for his discussion of the various versions of communion ecclesiology and his attempt to create a synthesis of those versions that can be a unifying vision for the Church, Dennis Doyle cited four elements which seem to always be

present.²⁵⁸ Of these four elements, three are illustrated in the “new” St. Agatha Church.²⁵⁹

The first is that there is a clear emphasis on the spiritual relationships present, over the more juridical or institutional aspects of the Church. While the parishioners at St. Agatha Church recognize and, for the most part, value that they are part of a larger body, the Roman Catholic Church, their expressed concern was for the more immediate parochial relationships. They are concerned about their personal relationships with God and how they worship God together. They are concerned about how they can be faithful together in their life as a parish. The evidence for this is seen in the defined purpose of the process, the topic selection and the resulting sense of communion that they now experience.

The second element of a communion ecclesiology present in St. Agatha’s new model of church is the importance that they place on the celebration of Eucharist a sign of their communion. It is important to note that the celebration of Eucharist was a part, at least indirectly, of the AI process. Clearly, there is nothing in AI theory or practice that includes the celebration of Eucharist, but each of the three parish gatherings followed the pattern of beginning with the celebration of Eucharist at 10:30, followed by a meal and the session with the 4-D process activity. The celebration of Eucharist was connected to the afternoon AI activity through the preaching during the celebration and the Prayers of the Faithful. Sometimes, we were able to further link the Eucharist to the AI activity by

²⁵⁸ See p. 76 for a review of these elements.

²⁵⁹ The exception is that there is no expressed concern for *ressourcement*. I do not think that this is in any way a criticism of the parish, but in the individual dream narratives and in the common dream developed through the process no one made reference to the New Testament communities, such as described in Acts 2: 42-47. I have no explanation for this and I do not think that it was detrimental to the process or the results. Nor do I think that it detracts from my observation that St. Agatha is an expression of communion ecclesiology.

making reference to the Mass readings of the day during the afternoon session. While some participants in the sessions did not attend the 10:30 Eucharistic celebration, the great majority did. It is impossible to determine the effect of the celebration of Eucharist on the results of the AI process at St. Agatha, but it does indicate the central importance that the celebration of Eucharist has in the identity of the St. Agatha faith community and is a sign of communion ecclesiology being operative.

Finally, Doyle highlights that within communion ecclesiology, there is a dynamic interplay between unity and diversity. This also is visible at St Agatha. The AI process helped create this identity at St. Agatha in that a guiding principle of AI is to create the broadest possible participation and to foster the creation of a unifying vision which can hold the input from diverse participation.

St. Agatha has become a model of a Vatican II parish and an example of communion ecclesiology in that there is broad, active participation of the laity who are empowered to assume their responsibilities within the church community. They are very much a Eucharistic community, which in their celebration of Eucharist and in their lives together reflect both the vertical and horizontal dimensions of communion.

Perhaps the clearest indication that the AI process facilitated a reconciliation which led to a “new” St. Agatha, is found in the dream narrative of the parish.²⁶⁰ The importance of narratives are recognized in both AI theory and in the Christian understanding of reconciliation that is represented in this paper through the writings of Schreiter.

Schreiter points to narratives as being important articulations of identity. The stories we tell about ourselves, reflect the truth that we believe about ourselves and who

²⁶⁰ See Chapter 2 --- Appendix 10.

we are. Developing this idea, Schreiter writes of violence as being narratives of the lie.²⁶¹ That is, when our humanity is damaged through violence, it creates the untruthful “story” that our lives are somehow less than the humanity that the Creator intended for us. A sign of reconciliation is when the victim is able to confront the narrative of the lie with a new narrative that reaffirms their humanity. That sign is present at St. Agatha. They have re-affirmed their identity as a faithful community and while they have not forgotten the memory of their former pastor’s betrayal of their trust, or the closing of their parishes, those memories have now been re-situated and those stories no longer have the toxic power to define their identity.

AI theory supports the importance of narratives and goes one step further in saying that our narratives actually create the reality of who we are.²⁶² Every organization has an inner dialogue and the organization change theory of AI is that for change to occur, it is necessary to change the inner dialogue of the organization. That is what the AI process at St. Agatha did and it led to the creation of their dream statement as an articulation of the desired future of the parish. But more than a statement of the desired future, it is also an articulation of their present identity, in that the process put into place the actions that will allow the parish to live that dream into reality. It is in this aspect, that the dream statement is an articulation of St. Agatha as a “new creation” and give further credence to the claim that AI can be an effective strategy for effecting reconciliation.

²⁶¹ See p. 103.

²⁶² This claim can be reviewed on p. 20.

Appreciative Inquiry in the praxis of reconciliation

My involvement in the AI process at St. Agatha was as an agent of reconciliation. Throughout my facilitation of the process, reconciliation was my concern, although I only infrequently stated that concern. In my work with the core team and in the initial session with the broader parish, my concern for reconciliation was declared. However, in the actual AI sessions, we very seldom spoke of reconciliation. We never identified and articulated the need for reconciliation. We never asked during the process: Is this moving us towards reconciliation? The project was to engage the parish in a discussion of their future, guided by the theory and practice of AI and to see if “what happens” can rightly be understood as reconciliation. As I have written above, I think that the project has demonstrated that AI can be an effective strategy for effecting reconciliation within a church community. Now I want to explore the implications of that discovery for the praxis of reconciliation.

I viewed my role in the process as one of consultant and facilitator. In my work with the core team I was responsible for sharing a knowledge of AI and assisting them in the design of a process which would be consistent with AI practice. Along with leading the design of the process, I was responsible for sharing in the leadership and facilitation of the process. There was a prophetic element in that role in that I was consistent in encouraging the participants by articulating confidence in the process and the possibility that it presented for creating a new St. Agatha.

Schreier using the post-resurrection stories in the Gospels to identify a four step process in the reconciliation ministry of Jesus: accompaniment, hospitality, re-connecting

and commissioning.²⁶³ He asserts that the first two steps are skills that can be developed and employed by a minister of reconciliation, while the latter two are dependent upon the gratuity of God. Within the AI process, facilitation can be understood as compatible with the activities of accompaniment and hospitality. I initiated a relationship with the parish in which I was willing to be with them in the situation created by the removal of their former pastor. In my role of facilitator, I accompanied them in the process that followed. Schreiter defined hospitality as the creation of a safe place of trust where human communication is possible again. At the center of the AI process is dialogue and communication; where all have been empowered and given voice. In the process at St. Agatha we created the space for that dialogue. The process at St. Agatha also resulted in a reconnection of the people with each other and a renewed acceptance of the mission that they have as a church. Within Schreiter's ministerial framework and the Christian understanding of reconciliation, this would be recognized and welcomed as the work of God. Within the secular theory of AI, this would be seen as the organization constructing that connectedness and sense of purpose through the dialogue facilitated within the process. This is a significant difference and it has implications for praxis.

Within the framework of a Christian spirituality of reconciliation, while an agent of reconciliation can find motivation for ministry in the vocation to be an ambassador of Christ and to continue the work of Christ in the world, this framework requires an acknowledgment of a certain impotency to enact that reconciliation in favor of accepting a dependency on God to provide the reconciliation desired. Ultimately, Schreiter suggests that a minister of reconciliation find solace in a spirituality that includes a belief in the eschatological promise of reconciliation, while continuing to work for

²⁶³ See p.108-110 to review a description of this framework.

reconciliation in this world. We can employ strategies and seek to be effective, but ultimately we are dependent on God to provide “success.” The Appreciative Inquiry framework would hold out the promise that all things, including reconciliation and peace, are possible in this world and that such a reconciled reality can be constructed through the creative design of strategies and applications of the principles of AI. While significantly different, I am not convinced that these two methodological frameworks are contradictory.

To hold these two divergent approaches together in a praxis of reconciliation, it is necessary to recognize that in the praxis of reconciliation there are two fields of concern — personal and social. In every situation of conflict, both aspects need consideration. On the personal level, the need for reconciliation is often expressed as a need for healing which can make forgiveness possible. On the social level, reconciliation is about the need to create a social systems or structure where justice is protected and the conflict will not reoccur. As Schreiter has observed, and as my own experience confirms, there is no strategy that effects that personal healing. While we can accompany the victim pastorally and therapeutically, for personal healing that can lead to their ability to forgive another; for the personal healing that can lead to a desire to restore right relationship, we are clearly dependent on God. And without the desire of the affected individuals to restore the relationship, it is not possible to address a conflict and to construct a peace. However, once a measure of personal healing has occurred and there is a desire to construct a new relationship, then the social constructionism principle of AI would assert that such a peace can be constructed by the parties involved. As a secular theory, AI is silent as to the role (if any) of God in that work.

I don't think that precludes AI from being employed as a strategy for reconciliation. Nor does it preclude the process itself from being adapted for use in an ecclesial context or prevent those who employ the strategy from articulating their motivation for the work in religious terms. Nor would it prevent one from believing that it is God who is effecting the new creation, working through the parties involved in the conflict to construct a peace. Accepting the social construction principle of AI is not to deny the role of God in the reconciliation process, any more than accepting the theory of evolution denies the role of God as creator.

Understanding and responding to conflict

A key underlying concern in the praxis of reconciliation is how to understand and respond to conflict. In this, AI offers a significantly different view and methodology than expressed in the writing of Schreiter and Lederach.²⁶⁴

Lederach writes (and Schreiter would agree) that conflict presents an opportunity for transformation. Reconciliation requires more than the resolution of the conflict, it requires that you look to the web of relationships which are effected by the conflict and address the causes of the conflict and create a social structure where those causes are no longer present.

The methodology is to move towards the conflict and to address the conflict directly. To do that, it is necessary for a setting to be created where it is safe for the parties to tell their story; to tell their "truth" concerning the situation or conflict.

Lederach would see the sharing of narratives as an opportunity to analyze the causes of the conflict and to engage the moral imagination to envision a way to peace. Schreiter

²⁶⁴ See Chapter 4 for a more complete description of their approach, which I will present in broad strokes here.

would suggest that it is necessary to remain with the parties in conflict, with a preference for being present to the victim, allowing them to tell the narrative of the conflict until, through the grace of God, the story begins to shift and loose its hold on determining the future of the one who has been victimized. Schreiter's emphasis would be to accompany the victim in the conflict; Lederach's emphasis would be to facilitate the dialogue between the parties in conflict and try to imagine a way through the conflict to a better, more peaceful situation. While both would address the conflict as an opportunity to reconcile relationships and not just to solve a problem, the focus on conflict is the same as in a problem solving strategy.

The approach of AI is 180 degrees different. Instead of moving toward the conflict, this theory would suggest that the conflict be bracketed and set aside in favor of a different focus, the positive core. Here the approach²⁶⁵ is to remember and to celebrate the best of the past and the more life giving aspects of the organization. Then the creativity and the imagination of the group is stimulated to come to a dream (expressed through narratives) in which that positive core is further enhanced. Building on the passion and interest of the participants, implementation of the dream is simultaneous with the process as the organization begins to act on its dream and to create a new and improved organization. Conflict is addressed only indirectly, in that the focus is on the construction of a social situation in which the conflict is no longer present.

Appreciative Inquiry's distinct approach to conflict is important in that it offers a radically different methodology to the praxis of reconciliation, and as such broadens the

²⁶⁵ This approach is described in Chapter 1 and is demonstrated in the project narrative in Chapter 2.

possible approaches available to a minister of reconciliation in that work.²⁶⁶ While distinctive from the praxis considerations of Schreiter and Lederach, it is not completely foreign to a praxis of reconciliation. I find it reminiscent of the peace process used by the Truth and Reconciliation commission in South Africa. There the decision was made to grant amnesty to all parties willing to speak the truth about their role in the atrocities committed during the time of apartheid rule. It was decided that the granting of amnesty was needed to make possible the constructing of a new South Africa, because to attempt to respond to the past violence through a judicial process would exhaust the resources of the country and would prevent the country from moving forward. There the conflict was not denied and it was the focus of many public hearings, but the specific injustices were not directly addressed, in the sense that no one was punished for their misdeeds, in favor of allowing the country to move forward and to direct their efforts in constructing a post-apartheid reality. Amnesty created the needed space for the activity of social constructionism.²⁶⁷

There are some commonalities between the approach of dealing with conflict directly, proposed by Schreiter and Lederach and the approach of AI which directs the activity toward a desired solution. Both place a priority on dialogue and respectful communication and encourage the telling of narratives as a part of that communication. Both would be based in the theory of social constructionism, although the methodology for that activity is only concretely developed in the AI framework. Both seek to engage the imagination of the participants.

²⁶⁶ In the next chapter I will discuss where AI might be used in conjunction with other methodologies in the praxis of reconciliation.

²⁶⁷ Desmond Tutu tells the story of the peace process in South Africa in his book, *No Peace Without Forgiveness*. (New York: Doubleday, 1999).

It is this area, the engagement of imagination, that the AI process can make another important contribution. Lederach has written on the importance of a moral imagination in the work of reconciliation. His writing includes a concern for how to develop such an imagination,²⁶⁸ but his writing is less clear about how to foster the engagement of the imagination in the praxis of reconciliation. Appreciative Inquiry offers a framework for such an engagement of the imagination. Specifically to the disciplines that Lederach presents as capable of stimulating the development of the imagination, the AI process encourages that all suspend judgment in favor of being curious about the ideas of others. AI creates space through the process for the creative act to emerge through the 4-D process. This is seen especially in the dream imagery exercises and the creative report presentations of those dreams.²⁶⁹ And finally, AI provides a process in which the acceptance of risk is tolerable because the changes being acted upon are directly tied to the concerns and dreams of the ones assuming the risk.

Conclusion and concerns about limitations

I think that my work with St. Agatha parish can rightly be understood as a ministry of reconciliation. Jean-Marie Tillard wrote that “Communion is not the same as a gathering together of friends. ...It is the coming together in Christ of men and women who have been reconciled.”²⁷⁰ The faith community at St. Agatha meets that criteria for communion. Appreciative Inquiry can be an effective strategy for reconciliation in an ecclesial setting and can help restore communion in a church that has suffered a

²⁶⁸ This concern is reported in the section on moral imagination in Chapter 4, p. 117-121.

²⁶⁹ The first two parish sessions of the process have examples of this; see the narrative of those sessions in Chapter 2.

²⁷⁰ Tillard, *Church of Churches*, 48. I used this quote previously on p. 96.

disruption to that communion. While I think I have made the case for that statement, I also think there is a need to acknowledge what the process at St. Agatha did not do.

What didn't it do? First of all, I think that we can say that it did not effect any reconciliation with Dan McCormack; nor between McCormack and the victims of his sexual abuse or the parish, as an indirect victim of his misdeeds. Through the AI process, we did effect reconciliation in that we constructed a new parish identity in which the effects McCormack's betrayal have been dealt with on the social level. But the AI process did not address the possible need that individuals may have for personal reconciliation with McCormack. The process did not engage his direct victims. Appreciative Inquiry is a theory of organizational dynamics and change; it does not directly offer a theory or therapeutic model for personal transformation or change. Simply, it is unclear what personal effect the process at St. Agatha may have had on the participants and their possible need for reconciliation with McCormack. As I reflect on the remarks of the core team members, the prevalent attitude seems to be that the events surrounding his betrayal of trust has been relegated to the past. I am willing to accept their reports that this is an indication that personal healing has occurred.

Secondly, the AI process did not effect reconciliation between the parish and the Archdiocese of Chicago. The manner in which the Archdiocese handled the abuse allegation at the parish and the removal of the McCormack drew heavy criticism in the press. In my initial conversations with parish leaders, it was clear that some of them shared in that critical assessment. However, because of the focus on the positive core, this never became a part of the AI process. Parishioners were not invited to air their concerns about the Archdiocese; not about their handling of the abuse situation or the

closing and consolidation of parishes. My project did not gather any evidence about the attitude of the parishioners towards the Archdiocese, before and after the process. In the design of the process I raised the question about inviting Archdiocesan staff to participate in the process as stakeholders of St. Agatha, but the decision was not made to invite any Archdiocesan representatives to participate in the process. While the dream narrative of St. Agatha does not include any aspect of their relationship to the Archdiocese, there also isn't any negative reference. It is unclear if St. Agatha Church has a need for reconciliation with the Archdiocese or if the process had any effect on their relationship with the Archdiocese.

Finally, the AI process at St. Agatha did not directly effect a reconciliation with those members of the parish who left the parish in response to the abuse allegations. Again, this is a result of the decision made to limit the scope of the inquiry to the current active parishioner. I had hoped that the AI process would have been used as an occasion to make a concerted effort to get past members to reengage with the parish. While I raised with the core team the possibility of using the process in this way, it did not happen. I do think that this was a conscious decision on the part of the core team, as much as, a result of the time constraints and the difficulty of inviting the participation of those who were no longer active in the parish. It should be noted, that while not included in the AI process, reaching out and inviting back these former parishioners are a part of the dream of St. Agatha and it is written into the action plan for evangelization that came through the process.

I think AI theory is a valuable dialogue partner in the development of a practical theology of reconciliation and the AI process has a place in the praxis of reconciliation.

