Between Wound and Resurrection

Whiteness, Sin, and Trauma in the Life and Leadership of the Church

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ABSTRACT

BETWEEN WOUND AND RESURRECTION: WHITENESS, SIN, AND TRAUMA IN THE LIFE AND LEADERSHIP OF THE CHURCH

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This Doctor of Ministry project begins from the conviction that the current crisis facing the church in the United States is not primarily institutional decline, but a deeper theological and cultural formation shaped by whiteness. This formation has influenced how congregations understand leadership, belonging, and stewardship, often reinforcing patterns of preservation, exclusion, and scarcity. Drawing on the parable of the rich fool in Luke 12:15–21, this project examines how "storehouses" function within congregational life as both material and theological systems that shape the use of resources and the imagination of the church.

The study employs a practical theological methodology grounded in qualitative research, lived ministry experience, and case-based observation across multiple congregational contexts. Within this study, experience is treated as a form of data through which recurring patterns can be identified and interpreted. Through sustained engagement with congregations navigating leadership transitions, financial strain, and adaptive challenges, the project identifies patterns that reveal how systems of whiteness shape decision-making, participation, and the use of resources.

In response, the study develops a framework for congregational reimagining shaped around four movements: observation, relational engagement, theological

reflection, and adaptive practice. This cyclical process invites congregations to name underlying systems, build trust, engage scripture as a source of imagination, and experiment with new forms of ministry rooted in abundance rather than scarcity.

The findings suggest that transformation occurs not through programmatic change alone, but through a reorientation of theological imagination that allows congregations to engage their resources, leadership, and community relationships in new ways. This project contributes to the field of practical theology by demonstrating how whiteness operates as a theological formation within congregational systems and by offering a practical, adaptable framework for faithful leadership and congregational renewal.

DEDICATION

To Jim, my best friend and partner in crime. Thank you for believing in me and for always being my biggest supporter. I love you very very very much!

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INTRODUCTION

The State of the Mainline Church

The current state of the mainline church in the United States cannot be understood apart from the deeper systems that shape its life and witness.

Many congregations across the United States are facing declining membership, aging buildings, and shrinking budgets. They must also navigate a growing disconnect between the church and the communities around them, along with changes within those communities themselves. In rural areas, farmers lament the loss of large farming families and the community they once sustained. The disappearance of the family farm, rising costs, and an inability to compete in open markets have reshaped these contexts. Urban congregations, meanwhile, are still learning who their neighbors are and how their neighborhoods have changed.

In both contexts, a similar challenge emerges, communities are changing. These congregations must discern how to release “what once was” while learning to embrace “what they are becoming.” Many pastors and congregational leaders carry deep grief as they struggle to see abundance and vibrancy amid declining numbers and offerings. They are called to inspire congregations to become brave and prophetic voices for all people in communities where exclusion has too often become normalized. This is not simply an urban, suburban, or rural issue; it reflects broader patterns within Christianity in the United States.

Nathan O. Hatch in his work the Democratization of American Christianity guides his readers through the vast history of American Christianity[1] He holds tension between the horrors of colonialism and the Christian movement across the United States. His work does not shy away from the realities and complexities of the early church in the United States in the harm or subjugation of others. As Nathan O. Hatch acknowledged in response to national protests against racial violence, the United States continues to "fail to live up to its ideals," revealing the persistence of systemic injustice and the ongoing denial of human dignity.[2]

In numerous communities, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) remains one of the few progressive Christian voices present. The loss of these congregations would mean institutional decline, while also removing a theological witness that affirms the dignity of all people. Within John Knox presbytery we have approximately 45 congregations that fall into this category. For leaders and members, these realities are not abstract trends; they are daily concerns. Congregations are asset-rich and cash-poor. Buildings constructed for previous generations now require care and resources that fewer people are available to provide. Shrinking budgets and aging infrastructure often shape what congregations believe is possible for their future.[3]

At the same time, congregations often struggle to respond creatively to change, even when resources and opportunities are present. Long-standing divisions, fear of loss,

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[1] Nathan O. Hatch, The Democratization of American Christianity (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).

[2] Nathan O. Hatch, "A Message from the President," Wake Forest University, May 2020.

[3] Elsdon, We Aren't Broke: Uncovering Hidden Resources for Mission and Ministry (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2021), 19.

and inherited patterns of leadership can make transformation difficult. These patterns can lead communities to rely on familiar ways of operating, even when those patterns no longer meet present realities.[4]

These challenges do not affect all communities equally. Those on the margins, including underemployed persons, women, people of color, LGBTQIA+ persons, migrants, and those who are differently abled, often experience church and community differently. Their realities reveal gaps between stated values and lived practices. These gaps point to concerns deeper than institutional survival alone. They raise questions about belonging, voice, and whose experiences shape congregational life.[5]

For this reason, the current crisis facing many congregations cannot be understood as only numerical or financial. The real problem is theological and cultural. This is evidenced in recurring patterns across congregations where decisions about leadership, stewardship, and belonging are shaped more by inherited cultural norms than by explicit theological reflection. These patterns are rooted in systems of belonging, leadership, and authority that have developed over time. These dynamics are connected to leadership patterns and to the ways communities understand who belongs and who is heard. Leaders tasked with stewarding these resources often struggle to discern how to use them faithfully, while also navigating barriers that prevent these resources from serving the people they were meant to support.

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[4] Beaumont, How to Lead When You Don't Know Where You're Going (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019), 49.

[5] Amy Kenny, My Body Is Not a Prayer Request: Disability Justice in the Church (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2022), audiobook, chap. 1.

In many cases, institutional memory has been shaped by a modern capitalist mindset that can unintentionally prioritize preservation over mission. A scarcity mindset can take root, making it difficult for congregations to recognize the abundance already present among the people of God. At the same time, the influence of prosperity-gospel thinking has shaped parts of the United States religious landscape in ways that complicate faithful stewardship.[6] As Reformed Christians, congregations are called to serve God's people rather than themselves and to embody Christ's presence in the world. This calling invites honest reflection on how histories of colonization, slavery, and the Protestant work ethic continue to shape assumptions about faithfulness and success.[7]

Earlier generations were often willing to reshape or rebuild church spaces to meet emerging needs. They started new missions and ministries to share the Gospel as they understood it. At the same time, those missionary movements were frequently intertwined with colonization and displacement. Many congregations today are seeking to reckon honestly with this history and to pursue forms of restorative justice. The uniquely United States religious experience of Christianity has been shaped by these complex forces, and their effects remain visible in congregational life today.[8]

With this history in mind, creativity and innovation remain essential for Reformed traditions seeking to respond faithfully to changing contexts. When congregations

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[6] Elsdon, We Aren't Broke: Uncovering Hidden Resources for Mission and Ministry (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2021), 62.

[7] Max Weber, The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism (New York: Scribner, 1958); Jennings, The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010); Ibram X. Kendi, Stamped from the Beginning (New York: Nation Books, 2016).

[8] Jennings, The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), Chapter 2.

become overly tied to institutions, buildings, or inherited structures, they may struggle to recognize the changing face of church and community as it exists today.[9]

This project begins from the conviction that the crisis facing the church is not primarily institutional decline, but a deeper theological and cultural formation shaped by whiteness. This formation constrains imagination and shapes how congregations understand resources, leadership, and belonging.

For too long we have lived in a church and world that is afraid to even name the systemic racism and structures of power still present and thriving in our midst.

This framework is designed to challenge the structures that sustain the power and privilege of whiteness.

This project sits in the uncomfortable space between owning our pasts and creating a church that not only survives but thrives in new ways that fit the world as we find her today. We are called to embrace all of God's people through a lens of equity and justice. This lens transcends welcome and moves the church into a space of true belonging.

By doing this, we are able to redefine abundance and to move the church towards means of adaptive reimagining and the formation of a just and more equitable ministry.

Through the lens of Luke 12:15–21, this project examines how "storehouses" function within congregational life, not only as physical realities, but as theological systems that shape how power, resources, and participation are ordered. Drawing on lived ministry experience, this project demonstrates that transformation does not begin with

[9] Beaumont, How to Lead When You Don't Know Where You're Going (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019), 23.

structural change alone, but with a reimagining of how congregations see themselves and their resources.

> Luke 12: 15-21 NSRVUE
>
> 15 And he said to them, “Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed, for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.” 16 Then he told them a parable: “The land of a rich man produced abundantly. 17 And he thought to himself, ‘What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?’ 18 Then he said, ‘I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. 19 And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.’ 20 But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’ 21 So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.”[10]

Through practices of observation, relational engagement, theological reflection, and adaptive action, congregations can begin to move from preservation toward participation in God’s ongoing work in the world.

While these dynamics can be identified at a broad level, they take on greater clarity when viewed within specific ministry contexts. The patterns of decline, grief, and institutional strain are not experienced uniformly. They are shaped by geography, culture, and local history. For this reason, it is necessary to ground this work in the particular contexts in which these realities are lived and interpreted.

Ministry Context

While these dynamics can be observed across the United States, they become more concrete and personal within specific ministry contexts. The broader patterns of

[10] New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition (NRSVUE), Luke 12:15–21.

change, grief, and reimagining described above are not abstract realities. They are lived experiences within the congregations and communities where this project is rooted.

My ministry has unfolded across a wide range of geographic and cultural contexts, each shaping how I understand congregational life and change. I have served congregations in North Alabama, the heart of Austin, Texas, rural East Tennessee, and southwest Oklahoma. I currently serve as an Executive Presbyter for John Knox Presbytery, which includes fifty-seven congregations and college ministries across southwest Wisconsin, southeast Minnesota, and northeast Iowa. These varied contexts have allowed me to witness how congregations navigate change within different social, political, and economic realities.[11]

Serving in these regions has made clear that congregational challenges are never abstract. They are shaped by local industries, demographics, and history. In agricultural communities, congregations often reflect the struggles of farming families facing economic pressures and changing markets. Recent tariff policies affecting agricultural commodities have added to the burden of already strained farms. In my current context, several congregations own and manage farmland left to the church. Their sustainability depends on land management, farming practices, and harvests. These assets can sustain ministry regardless of attendance numbers; however, they also present the risk of complacency and disengagement from the communities that indirectly support this ministry.

In urban settings, congregations wrestle with neighborhood transitions, housing pressures, and shifting community identities. I serve in the greater areas of Madison and

[11] Devon M. Reynolds, “Professional Resume” (personal document).

La Crosse Wisconsin, and Dubuque Iowa. Each includes significant higher education institutions and increasing racial and cultural diversity. At the same time, housing pressures make entry-level homes unattainable for many residents. Rural communities may have affordable housing and land but limited diversity, while urban communities often hold diversity but struggle with affordability. In both contexts, congregations frequently experience change faster than their structures can adapt.

I have also served in areas where political and theological identities are closely intertwined. In some of the most conservative regions of the United States, congregations navigate tensions between deeply held beliefs and a diverse and changing society. Within the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), I have observed a recurring dynamic in which pastors and congregations assume the other holds more extreme positions than they do. This assumption can inhibit honest engagement and shared mission. Leadership in these settings requires listening, trust-building, and a willingness to remain present in disagreement.

My earlier professional experience in technical support and corporate leadership, along with undergraduate training in management, equipped me with skills in systems thinking, organizational leadership, and relational communication.[12] These experiences continue to shape how I interpret congregational systems, particularly in moments where power, conflict, and institutional identity intersect.[13] Working within corporate and technical environments required navigating complex hierarchies, mediating conflict, and

[12] Devon M. Reynolds, "Professional Resume."

[13] Reynolds, "Professional Resume."

translating between differing perspectives. These same skills now inform how I engage congregations as they negotiate change, authority, and belonging.

In earlier ministry settings, I observed how fear and financial power shaped congregational decision-making, particularly during moments of crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Efforts to expand worship and community engagement revealed tensions around authority, belonging, and control. Navigating pastoral responses during the Black Lives Matter movement likewise surfaced both strengths and weaknesses in congregational systems. These moments offered insight into how power dynamics influence congregational life and how systems of belonging are reinforced or disrupted in practice.[14]

Throughout my ministry, I have drawn on both liberation theology and systematic theology as interpretive frameworks. Liberation theology has encouraged attentiveness to those on the margins and to the social realities shaping people's lives.[15] Systematic theology has provided language for understanding how beliefs, practices, and structures fit together in the life of the church.[16] Together, these lenses have shaped the questions guiding this project: not only what congregations do, but why they do it, and who is centered in their decisions.

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[14] Devon M. Reynolds, "Social Impact Reflection" (unpublished course document).

[15] James H. Cone, A Black Theology of Liberation (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1970), 22; Jennings, The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010) Chapter 2.

[16] Migliore, Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 2; Guthrie, Christian Doctrine, rev. ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 3.

My current role within a connectional church structure offers a broad view of congregational life. I can observe patterns across multiple congregations rather than a single setting.[17] This vantage point reveals recurring themes: grief over loss, anxiety about sustainability, questions of identity, and hopes for renewal. It also reveals creativity, resilience, and deep care for community. These observations emerge not from theory alone, but from ongoing relationships, conversations, and shared ministry.

This work is further informed by lived experience navigating systems shaped by class, gender, and power. My own social location and professional journey have required learning how to build relationships across differences, speak truth within systems, and engage leadership in spaces where authority is not always equally distributed.[18] These experiences continue to inform how I understand belonging, access, and the formation of communal life within the church.

This project also recognizes that the systems of theological education and credentialing within which it is produced are not neutral. They are shaped by whiteness, privilege, and historically narrow expectations of authority. Leaders who do not fit traditional models are often required to obtain additional credentials in order to be granted the same level of legitimacy. This reality exposes deeper theological questions about how the church recognizes calling, leadership, and wisdom.

My own vocational path demonstrates a different formation. I was not born into wealth or power. I am the product of a large complex southern family. I grew up on public benefits and a fixed income, the youngest of seven kids across my parents' 58-year

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[17] Author's field observation across multiple congregations, John Knox Presbytery, 2020–2025.

[18] Reynolds, "Social Capital Reflection" (course document).

marriage. I live with dyslexia, learning to read at eleven and not proficiently until I was twenty-four years old. I graduated High School with an advanced diploma fighting for every B and C I earned. I live with a rare genetic condition which meant I was extremely sick most of my life until I received my diagnosis and proper therapy. I was not raised in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), I became Presbyterian at thirty-one. I spent twenty years in various corporate work, in technology and supporting work around tech and government entities. I finished my BA with a concentration in Business at thirty-six. I did this while working full time at a Fortune 15 tech company. I started seminary, graduated and was in my first call by the time I was thirty-nine. I served two congregations, numerous committees, non-profits, and national organizations. I became an Executive Presbyter after five years of ordained ministry.

When I reflect over the past 10 years of my life I understand the abundant grace found in the work of serving God's people. I went from entering seminary to defending this dissertation in under ten years. I was already doing the work, but the Holy Spirit needed me to do it in the Church and in the boardroom. My work is driven by the knowledge that every day is a gift from God, and nothing is promised. When asked how I managed to move so fast in my work in the church, I simply explain "If it is not building up the kingdom of God, we do not have time for it."

This moment reveals how deeply embedded systems of belonging and authority shape congregational decision-making, often operating beneath the level of conscious intent. This pattern exposes what Bonilla-Silva identifies as the normalization of

racialized social systems that appear neutral while maintaining existing hierarchies.[19] It further extends Jennings' argument that Christian imagination has been historically formed in ways that tether authority to particular cultural identities. In this case, congregational decision-making is not simply pragmatic, but theologically and culturally conditioned by inherited assumptions about legitimacy and belonging.[20]

In many professional contexts, this breadth of experience is recognized as an asset. Within the church, it is often overlooked or undervalued. This tension is not outside the scope of this project. It is part of the very system this work seeks to examine.

This trajectory reveals a consistent pattern across ecclesial systems in which legitimacy is often assigned through credentialing, pedigree, and proximity to dominant cultural norms rather than through demonstrated calling or leadership. This exposes broader systems of whiteness that organize authority within the church, privileging particular forms of formation while rendering others suspect or invisible. As Bonilla-Silva suggests, such patterns persist not through explicit exclusion, but through normalized expectations that appear neutral while reinforcing existing hierarchies.[21]

This demonstrates the dynamics Bonilla-Silva identifies, while also revealing how they operate with theological authority within congregational life.[22]

In the church, this is evident when congregations select pastors based on pedigree rather than discernment of calling. This is lived out when congregations insist a pastor be

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[19] Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, Racism without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America, 6th ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2022), 79.

[20] Jennings, The Christian Imagination, Chapter 2.

[21] Bonilla-Silva, Racism without Racists, 19.

[22] Bonilla-Silva, Racism without Racists, 125.

from a specific seminary. That they have a PhD or DMin, a PhD with preference often given to the PhD or grew up in large steeple congregations and come from places of privilege.

A notable example of this was lived out in my own ministry. Before seminary, I served on the pulpit supply list, preaching across my home presbytery twice a month. I served as pulpit supply at two different small but affluent congregations; they are truly lovely people.

The first congregation was close to where I attended high school and junior college. I will never forget the first time I preached the former president of the college spoke up during announcements and told everyone that I was on his presidents list and received the presidential scholarship when I was right out of high school. For this congregation the fact that I was one of their kids from their community carried social capital, I was not an outsider. They did not care who my parents were but that I was formed by people they knew and trusted, therefore I was enough. I would leave this congregation and drive to the next church to preach the same sermon in a different context.

After my second or third trip I shared with the second congregation that my great grandparents are buried in their cemetery. After service we talked, and I explained who my grandparents were and where they were buried. I was overjoyed to learn my family did have Presbyterian roots. The roots are so deep they are planted (buried) in a Presbyterian cemetery. I was never invited to preach there again.

For the second congregation learning that the person in the pulpits great grandparents lived there was the issue. My family were all sharecroppers. The remnants

left over from the intermingling of the Cherokee people and the Scotch Irish immigrants that settled southern Appalachia. After the trail of tears, they assimilated and became landowning farmers and sharecroppers in and around the Bankhead National Forest. It did not matter that they loved my sermons and it was always wonderful feedback. The message beneath the decision was clear: you do not put "the help" in the pulpit. They did not care how called or talented I was, I did not fit the right pedigree to speak with authority in the church. Jesus tells us in Luke 4:24, "Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in his hometown.

This experience does not simply illustrate how systems of whiteness function within congregational life. It exposes a mechanism of gatekeeping through which authority is assigned, protected, and denied.

What is operating in this moment is not preference, and it is not theological discernment. It is the deployment of symbolic capital rooted in class history, cultural familiarity, and perceived proximity to legitimacy. In the first congregation, I was granted authority because I was recognized as "one of their own." In the second, that same authority was revoked when my social class was reinterpreted through the lens of wealth and power. The sermon did not change. The body in the pulpit did.

This is where Bonilla-Silva's analysis names the pattern but does not fully account for its impact within the church. What he describes as the normalization of racialized systems operates here as a theological filter. While Bonilla-Silva's framework identifies the persistence of racialized systems, this case reveals how those systems take on theological authority within congregational life. What is at stake is not only social hierarchy, but the determination of who is recognized as a legitimate bearer of the Word.

This extends his analysis by demonstrating that these systems do not remain external to the church but are internalized within its practices of discernment, leadership, and proclamation.

These are not simply social expectations; they determine who is trusted to speak on behalf of God. What appears as a neutral decision about "fit" is, in fact, the reproduction of hierarchy within a sacred space. The very place where the church claims to be shaped by the Word becomes, in this moment, a site of exclusion and the reinforcement of hierarchy.

Jennings pushes this further. This moment is not only about exclusion; it is about formation. The Christian imagination has been shaped to recognize authority in bodies that reflect particular cultural and historical norms.

My presence disrupted that imagination—not because of theological deficiency, but because I did not align with its expectations. A working-class body with ambiguous social and racial identity was read not as a bearer of authority, but as a disruption to it.

By these standards, even Jesus would not be recognized as legitimate or authorized to preach and teach in the pulpit.

Copeland forces the deepest theological reckoning. If the body is the locus of lived theological meaning, then the rejection of certain bodies from positions of authority is not incidental, it is a theological failure. It reveals a distorted understanding of the Imago Dei, where dignity and calling are filtered through systems the church has not named but continues to obey. This uncovers a congregation operating with internalized systems of class and race that have been granted theological authority without being named as such.

This moment, therefore, is not anecdotal. It is diagnostic. Across multiple congregations, I have observed the same pattern: authority is granted through pedigree, institutional affiliation, and cultural familiarity rather than through discernment of calling. This pattern appears across multiple congregational contexts, though it is often expressed differently depending on class composition, regional culture, and institutional history. While the surface dynamics vary, the underlying mechanism remains consistent: authority is assigned through alignment with inherited cultural expectations rather than discernment of calling. What is presented as congregational preference is, in fact, the operation of a broader system organizing belonging and legitimacy.

If this is true, then the implications for the church are unavoidable. Congregations cannot claim to embody the body of Christ while maintaining systems that predetermine whose bodies are trusted to lead. Transformation, therefore, requires more than expanding welcome. It demands a reexamination of the theological assumptions that underwrite authority itself, and a willingness to disrupt them in practice.

Having named how authority is constructed and protected within congregational life, the question that follows is not simply who is welcomed, but who is permitted to belong.

Belonging vs. Welcome

It was only through land ownership and assimilation that my father's side of the family moved from being mixed race / native to white. Scars and trauma that still rear their head in places of power and institution. What appears as an isolated experience is, in fact, part of a broader pattern in which systems of whiteness shape how congregations understand leadership, voice, and belonging.

This pattern reveals how systems of whiteness function not only through exclusion, but through the normalization of particular forms of authority, belonging, and legitimacy within congregational life.

To name this reality is not to reject theological education, but to interrogate how systems of authority, belonging, and recognition are formed and sustained. If the church is to more fully embody the body of Christ, it must examine the assumptions that determine who is seen, who is heard, and who is trusted to lead.

Because of this range of experience, this project does not emerge from a single congregation's story but from patterns observed across diverse settings. The questions guiding this research arise from lived ministry alongside congregations seeking to remain faithful amid change. These contexts provide the grounding for examining how culture, theology, and systems of belonging shape congregational life. They also make visible the underlying patterns of whiteness, sin, and trauma that this project seeks to name and engage.[23]

The breadth of experience puts me in a unique position to recognize patterns that are often difficult to see from within a single congregational context. This vantage point allows me to engage questions of whiteness, belonging, leadership, and stewardship not as isolated issues, but as interconnected systems shaping the life of the church across multiple settings.

These experiences, while varied in context, reveal consistent patterns across congregational life. What initially presents as institutional challenge often points to

[23] Bonilla-Silva, Racism without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America, 6th ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2022), 40; Copeland, Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2023), 93.

deeper dynamics at work beneath the surface. To move beyond surface-level analysis, this project turns to examine the underlying systems shaping these realities. This requires looking beyond numerical decline toward the theological and cultural forces organizing the life of the church.

Methodological Approach

This project employs a practical theological methodology grounded in lived ministry experience, qualitative observation, and case-based reflection.[24] The knowledge generated in this work emerges through sustained engagement with congregations across multiple contexts, rather than from a single-site study. Serving within a connectional system allows for comparative observation across multiple congregations. Patterns of leadership, stewardship, belonging, and decision-making can be identified across diverse contexts. To further clarify the scope and grounding of this methodology, it is important to define how data is gathered and interpreted within this study.[25]

Patterns within this study are not identified through isolated experience, but through recurrence across multiple congregational contexts. A dynamic is treated as a pattern when it appears consistently across varied settings, including differences in geography, congregational size, leadership structure, and cultural context. Observations are compared over time and across these contexts, allowing for the identification of repeated dynamics related to authority, belonging, stewardship, and decision-making.

[24] Richard R. Osmer, Practical Theology: An Introduction (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008) 1.

[25] Beaumont, How to Lead When You Don't Know Where You're Going, 154.

This study distinguishes carefully between observation and interpretation. Observation refers to the concrete experiences of congregational life, including conversations, leadership decisions, conflicts, financial practices, and relational dynamics. Interpretation occurs only after patterns of recurrence have been identified, and these observations are brought into dialogue with theological and sociological frameworks. This distinction allows the study to move beyond anecdotal reflection toward systemic analysis.

The trustworthiness of this work is grounded in sustained engagement across more than fifty congregations within a connectional church system. This multi-context approach provides a comparative framework in which patterns can be tested against diverse ministry settings rather than a single case. Conclusions are not drawn from singular events but from repeated dynamics observed across multiple contexts over time.

In this way, lived experience functions not as personal narrative alone, but as qualitative data that reveals recurring systems shaping congregational life. Through this process, the study demonstrates how patterns of whiteness, authority, and belonging are not incidental, but structurally embedded within the practices of the church.

This methodology follows a cyclical process of observation, relational engagement, theological reflection, and adaptive practice. Observation begins with attending to the lived realities of congregational life through conversations, leadership interactions, financial review, and shared ministry experiences. These observations are interpreted through relational engagement, where trust-building and direct conversation allow underlying assumptions, tensions, and systems to surface more clearly.

Theological reflection then brings these experiences into conversation with Scripture and theological tradition, particularly within the Reformed framework that calls the church to ongoing examination and reform. Finally, adaptive practice emerges as congregations experiment with new ways of engaging leadership, resources, and community, informed by both theological insight and lived experience.[26]

In this way, this project understands knowledge as emerging from the intersection of practice and reflection. It is not detached from ministry but formed within it. This approach allows patterns of whiteness, belonging, power, and stewardship to be identified not only as abstract concepts, but as lived realities shaping the life of the church.

The cyclical process of observation, relational engagement, theological reflection, and adaptive practice pushes beyond established models of practical theological inquiry, in which ministry contexts function as sites of theological knowledge. Through this approach, recurring patterns across congregations are identified, interpreted, and brought into conversation with theological tradition.

This study draws on sustained ministry engagement across multiple congregational contexts over a period of more than five years. These contexts include service in East Tennessee, Indian Nations Presbytery in Oklahoma, and John Knox Presbytery in the upper Midwest. In my current role, this includes direct engagement with approximately fifty-seven congregations. This allows for comparative observation across diverse geographic, cultural, and socioeconomic settings.

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[26] Ronald A. Heifetz, Leadership Without Easy Answers (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 67.

Within this project, “data” includes congregational conversations, leadership interactions, financial and institutional reviews, and direct participation in moments of conflict, transition, and discernment. These observations are not limited to a single site. They emerge from ongoing relationships and repeated patterns encountered across multiple ministry contexts.

Patterns are identified not through isolated incidents, but through recurring dynamics observed across these varied settings. Consistent themes related to belonging, authority, stewardship, and decision-making provide the basis for the theological and practical analysis that follows. This multi-context approach allows the project to move beyond anecdotal reflection and toward identifying broader systems shaping congregational life.

This approach aligns with practical theological methodologies that treat ministry contexts as sites of theological knowledge. Lived experience, when critically interpreted, contributes to broader theological understanding.

This perspective is further shaped by prior professional experience in corporate and non-profit environments, where I engaged organizational systems, leadership structures, and institutional change processes. These recurring dynamics provide the basis for theological and practical analysis across contexts.

The Crisis Beneath the Crisis: Looking Beyond the Numbers

This section builds on existing scholarship in sociology and theology that examines how systems of power, culture, and belonging are formed and sustained within institutional life. Drawing on the work of Bonilla-Silva and Jennings, this project understands congregational dynamics not as isolated behaviors, but as expressions of

deeply embedded systems that shape how communities understand identity, authority, and participation.

While Bonilla-Silva and Jennings provide critical frameworks for understanding how systems of race and imagination are formed and sustained, this project extends their work by demonstrating how these dynamics function as theological formations within congregational systems. In this way, whiteness operates not only as a social structure, but as a theological framework that shapes how authority, belonging, and participation are interpreted within the life of the church.

In the U.S. Protestant Christian context, Sunday morning worship attendance is declining. Offerings and missional giving are down at the local level, directly affecting support for the connectional church across all structures. Budget planning becomes increasingly unstable when congregational giving cannot be reliably predicted. In the Presbyterian context in which I serve, Per Capita and Mission giving at the congregational level fund the work of the Presbytery, which is then shared with the Synod and the Office of the General Assembly.

These realities, however, extend beyond finances and expose deeper questions about what it means to be church in the world as it exists today. Numbers are measurable, but they do not account for the systems that produce them.[27] This extends existing conversations on institutional decline by demonstrating that these measurable indicators are not the primary crisis, but the visible expression of deeper theological and cultural systems organizing congregational life. They signal underlying dynamics within the U.S.

[27] James David Hudnut-Beumler, In Pursuit of the Almighty's Dollar: A History of Money and American Protestantism (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 199.

Christian experience, including the ways money, power, and influence function within congregational life.

This project contends that these deeper systems represent the true crisis facing the contemporary church.[28] Decline is not the problem itself; it is the visible outcome of a more profound theological and cultural disruption. This section establishes the central framework for this project by examining how questions of belonging, culture, and power function as organizing systems within congregational life.

In an organization the size of John Knox Presbytery, I have a bird's-eye view of how different congregations respond to the call to serve all of God's people. This vantage point allows for comparative analysis across multiple contexts, revealing patterns that are not always visible within a single congregation. Some congregations of fewer than fifty members and budgets under fifty thousand dollars are actively engaged in ministry, leveraging social capital to serve their communities. At the same time, congregations of comparable size may hold significant financial reserves while demonstrating minimal engagement in mission or community life. Financial resources alone do not produce vitality or a willingness to serve.[29] Rather, they are deployed—or withheld—within existing systems of meaning and control.

Drawing on sustained qualitative observation across multiple congregations, these patterns are not incidental but consistent. They reflect broader structural dynamics

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[28] Nathan O. Hatch, The Democratization of American Christianity (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 17.

[29] Elsdon, We Aren't Broke,78.

identified in existing scholarship, while also revealing how these systems take on uniquely theological dimensions within the life of the church.

This contrast demonstrates that numbers alone do not define congregational health. To understand why some congregations retain wealth rather than deploy it for ministry, deeper structural questions must be asked. At the denominational level, congregations report attendance, membership, baptisms, deaths, and demographic data. They do not typically report the full scope of financial assets beyond local structures. As a result, significant concentrations of wealth may exist within local communities without broader visibility, limiting both accountability and the capacity for shared mission.

In my work with congregations, I regularly engage budgets, annual reports, endowments, and asset portfolios.[30] When a congregation seeks to call a pastor, financial capacity must be demonstrated. These conversations require moving beyond polite avoidance toward direct and honest evaluation. Money, and the systems that govern its control, frequently complicate mission decisions. When examined directly, these dynamics reveal patterns of fear, scarcity thinking, and institutional control that shape how congregations understand their role in the world.[31]

Financial data often functions as an entry point into deeper congregational realities. Many congregations carry collective memory shaped by decline, conflict, or past crises. These experiences inform present decision-making, often in ways that are unspoken yet highly influential. Cultural patterns such as “Midwest Nice,” a form of

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[30] Author’s analysis of congregational budgets, reports, and assets, John Knox Presbytery, 2024–2025.

[31] Migliore, Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 16; Guthrie, Christian Doctrine, rev. ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 20.

passive politeness that avoids conflict, can prevent direct engagement with questions of money, power, and authority. While regionally expressed, these dynamics are not isolated; they reflect broader cultural patterns that influence church life across contexts. This moment makes it visible how deeply embedded systems of belonging and authority shape congregational decision-making, often operating beneath the level of conscious intent. This demonstrates what Eduardo Bonilla-Silva describes as systems that persist through "subtle, institutional, and often invisible mechanisms" that maintain existing hierarchies without overt conflict.[32]

This pattern demonstrates the dynamics Bonilla-Silva describes, while also revealing how they function with theological authority within congregational life. In this case, conflict avoidance and politeness function as mechanisms that preserve existing power structures, limiting opportunities for honest engagement and meaningful change. What appears as politeness, conflict avoidance, or procedural caution can function as a mechanism for preserving existing power structures, limiting opportunities for meaningful change or disruption.[33]

Numbers, therefore, do not simply report reality; they can obscure it. They mask trauma, reinforce learned behaviors, and provide a surface-level account that conceals deeper systems at work. They become meaningful only when interpreted through sustained relational engagement and critical questioning. Through relationship-building

[32] Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, Racism without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America, 6th ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2022), 105.

[33] Bonilla-Silva, Racism without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America, 6th ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2022), 105.

and direct conversation, leaders can begin to identify and engage the underlying structures shaping congregational life.[34]

Belonging vs. Welcome

Questions of money and control inevitably lead to deeper questions of belonging and voice. These are not secondary concerns; they are central to how congregational life is organized and experienced. Congregations frequently speak of welcome, hospitality, and openness. Yet a more pressing question remains: who truly belongs, and who has the authority to shape that belonging?

Church signage declaring "All are welcome" illustrates this tension. Such language may signal full affirmation, or it may function as a form of conditional inclusion that leaves existing norms unchallenged. The Gospels present a more complex picture. Jesus demonstrates radical hospitality through healing, feeding, and welcoming those on the margins. He also forms community and relationship. He does not only receive people; he incorporates them into a reconstituted community in which belonging carries implications for identity, participation, and shared life.[35]

Understanding the distinction between hospitality and belonging exposes deeper dynamics of privilege and power. The well-known phrase that Sunday morning is one of the most segregated hours in the United States remains relevant.[36] Segregation is not

[34] Rambo, Spirit and Trauma: A Theology of Remaining (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010) Chapter 1.

[35] Luke 12:15–21.

[36] Martin Luther King Jr., "Letter from Birmingham Jail," April 16, 1963.

limited to race. It extends to class, gender, theology, and culture, shaping who is visible, who is heard, and who is granted authority within congregational life.

Many congregations understand themselves to be warm and welcoming. This may be accurate for those who align with established cultural and theological norms. Belonging, however, requires a different analysis. It asks who can participate fully in leadership, decision-making, and sacramental life. One of the clearest indicators of belonging is paid leadership. Who is deemed worthy of compensation for ministry reveals how value is assigned within the system. A congregation may claim openness while refusing to ordain women or host same-sex weddings. In such cases, individuals are included at the level of presence but excluded from participation and authority.

Belonging is not simply a relational posture; it is a structural reality. As Copeland reminds us, Christian community must be understood through embodied participation, not abstract inclusion, making belonging a matter of lived, structural reality rather than symbolic welcome.[37] While existing scholarship distinguishes between inclusion and belonging, this project extends that distinction by demonstrating how belonging is enacted structurally within congregational systems. It is not simply a matter of relational posture, but of authority, participation, and access to decision-making. In this way, the gap between welcome and belonging reveals not only pastoral tension, but a theological failure to embody the full reality of the body of Christ.

This structural distinction becomes visible in how leadership, decision-making, and authority are organized within congregational life. It is enacted through policies, practices, and patterns that determine who has access to power within the community.

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[37] Copeland, Enfleshing Freedom, 15.

When belonging is limited, the result is not only exclusion but a narrowing of imagination, mission, and shared ministry.

These dynamics demonstrate that belonging is not simply a matter of intention or language but is structured through cultural and institutional systems that shape who is able to participate fully in the life of the church. What appears as an isolated experience is, in fact, part of a broader pattern in which systems of whiteness shape how congregations understand leadership, voice, and belonging.

When Culture Becomes Theology

Questions of belonging cannot be separated from culture. The systems that define who belongs are shaped, reinforced, and sustained through cultural norms. Culture shapes how belonging is defined, enforced, and protected. When these norms remain unnamed, they are frequently misrecognized as theology, taking on an authority they were never intended to hold.

This confusion is not incidental; it is formative. What a community experiences as familiar, comfortable, and faithful is shaped as much by culture as by Scripture. When these patterns go unexamined, they begin to function as theological claims rather than cultural expressions, reinforcing particular ways of being church while obscuring their origins.

Culture and theology have always been intertwined. Jesus lived as a Jewish man within a particular cultural and religious context, and from the earliest Jesus-believing communities, faith has been expressed through cultural lenses. Each generation interprets Scripture within its own social realities. The critical question is not whether culture

shapes theology, but whether those cultural influences are identified, examined, and held accountable.

In the Presbyterian tradition, the Book of Confessions reminds us that creeds are contextual statements of faith shaped by specific historical concerns. They ground the church, but they are not fixed in time. The difficulty arises when inherited cultural practices are treated as unchangeable theology. The phrase “we have always done it this way” often signals this shift from contextual expression to assumed doctrinal necessity.

Diverse leadership frequently exposes these tensions. When lived experience enters preaching or leadership, it can disrupt expectations formed within dominant cultural frameworks. This disruption is often misinterpreted as theological deviation when it is, in fact, a challenge to cultural normativity. Naming these differences can build trust and social capital rather than diminish it. Worship style, dress, and liturgical choices are often cultural before they are theological. Even the Geneva robe, now understood as a marker of Protestant identity, originated as a cultural response within a particular historical context.

When operating within these systems, it can be difficult to identify how whiteness and cultural normativity function, particularly when they remain unnamed. Consider traditional U.S. Christian worship spaces. Many are structured with a pulpit or lectern that elevates the pastor above the congregation. This is often framed theologically as a centering of the Word of God, in contrast to Roman Catholic worship centered on the Eucharist. While this theological distinction is valid, it does not fully account for the historical and practical conditions that shaped these spaces.

In earlier periods, before amplification, elevation served a functional purpose. Pastors needed to be seen and heard, and worship spaces were designed accordingly. Over time, what began as a practical response to material constraints became embedded within Christian identity. What was once adaptive became normative, and eventually theological.

This pattern has ongoing implications. Systems that originated in particular historical contexts continue to shape who can participate fully in congregational life. As previously noted, many systems were not designed to include people of color, women, queer individuals, or those with disabilities. Architectural features such as elevated pulpits or inaccessible platforms can function as barriers to leadership. A requirement as simple as ascending steps to preach may prevent qualified candidates from being considered, while simultaneously limiting congregations from recognizing the full range of leadership available to them. What appears as tradition may, in practice, operate as a system of exclusion rooted in earlier assumptions about who belongs in positions of authority.

Tithing offers another example of how culture and theology become intertwined. In the United States, it developed into a primary funding model shaped by broader economic systems and cultural expectations. While generosity is central to Christian life, its interpretation has often been shaped by these same systems. In some cases, this has led to distortions such as prosperity teachings that link financial giving with divine favor.[38]

[38] James David Hudnut-Beumler, In Pursuit of the Almighty's Dollar: A History of Money and American Protestantism (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 199.

In my work, I regularly engage individuals and communities shaped by prosperity-oriented theology. Across conversations with a wide range of faith leaders, a consistent pattern emerges: the need to interrupt cycles of predatory teaching that function in ways similar to predatory lending. These systems do not simply misinterpret theology; they actively reshape the relationship between faith, money, and power. Christian worship is not oriented toward the accumulation of wealth as evidence of divine favor. The call of the church is to serve God's people. The promise is not prosperity, but shared burden and collective participation in the work of God.

Recognizing the difference between culture and theology does not weaken the church; it strengthens its capacity for faithful discernment. When cultural assumptions are named, congregations gain the freedom to distinguish between what is essential to the Gospel and what has been historically inherited. This distinction is necessary for any meaningful engagement with the challenges facing the contemporary church.

Power, Memory, and Decision-Making

When culture is mistaken for theology, power often operates without being named. Questions of belonging and culture ultimately converge in systems of power.

These cultural and theological assumptions do not remain abstract; they are enacted through systems of power that shape how decisions are made within congregational life.

Congregations are shaped by institutional memory, stories, traumas, victories, and shared narratives. Official records preserved by Clerks of Session capture part of this story. Much of congregational identity, however, lives in informal memory carried by

long-time members and community leaders. Power operates both formally and informally.

While these dynamics align with broader scholarly discussions, this project demonstrates how they take on distinct theological meaning within congregational systems.

Such influence can provide stability, but it can also foster resistance to change. Long-standing members often act from a desire to protect what they love. Their motivations are frequently rooted in care rather than control; however, these dynamics still function to shape access, influence, and decision-making within the system. Healthy leadership names these realities while honoring the stories behind them. Trust-building and social capital are essential for uncovering institutional memory and understanding its impact.[39]

Risk tolerance also shapes decision-making. Communities facing economic instability often lean toward maintenance over mission. Others experiment more freely. These tendencies reflect shared experiences of trauma or security.[40] Luke 12 reminds us of the limits of storing wealth for a future that is not promised[41]. Congregations wrestling with scarcity or fear benefit from naming those experiences and exploring abundance together.

A Framework Shaped by History

[39] Rambo, Spirit and Trauma, Chapter 3.

[40] Rambo, Spirit and Trauma Chapter 3.

[41] Luke 12:15–21.

These dynamics of belonging, culture, and power do not emerge in isolation. They are historically produced and sustained through inherited systems that continue to shape congregational life.

Building on Jennings' work on the formation of racialized Christian imagination, this project understands whiteness not simply as a demographic or cultural category, but as a theological and historical framework that shapes how congregations define normalcy, authority, and belonging.

History must be interpreted within its context, and it is never neutral. Those who hold power frequently shape what is remembered, preserved, and transmitted. In Christian history, literacy, education, and institutional authority concentrated interpretive power among religious leaders, allowing particular theological perspectives to be established as normative.

In the United States, Christian theology has been formed largely through white, Eurocentric, male perspectives. These perspectives have often been presented as neutral or universal, obscuring the ways they reflect specific social and cultural locations. Contemporary theological reflection increasingly recognizes the role of lived experience, social location, and intersectionality in shaping both interpretation and practice.

In this study, I refer to this historical and cultural framework as whiteness. Whiteness names the systems that center white, middle-class, heteronormative norms as the standard within both church and society. It operates not only at the level of individual identity, but as a structuring force that shapes assumptions about authority, belonging, and theological legitimacy.

History does not remain in the past; it actively shapes present realities. Every tradition begins as an innovation, yet over time practices become normalized and embedded within institutional life. When these patterns are no longer examined, they function as unchallenged frameworks that guide how congregations interpret change, risk, and abundance.

The crisis beneath the crisis, therefore, is not simply about declining numbers, but about the systems that organize how the church understands belonging, culture, and power. These dimensions are not independent; they operate together as an interconnected framework that structures congregational life. Inherited patterns of whiteness, authority, and theological interpretation continue to define what is seen as faithful, possible, and permissible within the church.

The patterns identified in congregational life point beyond practical challenges toward deeper questions of meaning, identity, and formation. While these realities are often described through the language of decline, they are more accurately understood as the visible expression of underlying theological and cultural systems at work.

To engage these systems faithfully, the work must move from observation into theological reflection. This requires a critical examination of how history, culture, and theology have shaped the assumptions that organize congregational life. The following section establishes the theological and historical foundations necessary to interpret the crisis beneath the crisis.

What appears as decline, therefore, is more accurately understood as the visible expression of these underlying systems at work.

Taken together, these dynamics demonstrate that the challenges facing congregational life are not simply matters of decline or adaptation but are rooted in deeper systems that shape how the church understands identity, authority, and mission. This project contributes to the broader theological conversation by making these systems visible within lived congregational experience and by identifying how they continue to influence both perception and practice.

While these patterns appear consistently across many congregational contexts, they are not expressed uniformly. Some congregations actively resist these dynamics, cultivating practices of shared leadership, cultural humility, and deeper belonging. Regional differences, theological commitments, and local leadership all shape how these systems are experienced and engaged. Acknowledging this complexity does not weaken the argument of this project. It strengthens it by recognizing that systems of whiteness and power are both pervasive and contested within the life of the church

Research Questions

The following research questions emerge from the intersection of lived ministry experience, theological reflection, and engagement with existing scholarship on race, power, and congregational life. They are designed to guide this project's examination of how systems of whiteness function within the theological and practical realities of the church.

1. **How do systems of whiteness function as theological formations that shape congregational imagination, leadership, and stewardship within predominantly white Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) contexts?**

2. **How do congregational "storehouses" (Luke 12:15–21) operate as both material and theological systems that influence decision-making, belonging, and the use of resources in mainline congregations?**
3. **How might a practical theological framework grounded in observation, relational engagement, theological reflection, and adaptive practice enable congregations to move from preservation toward participation in God's work?**

These questions are explored through a practical theological methodology that integrates qualitative observation, relational engagement, theological reflection, and adaptive practice. Together, they frame this project's contribution to ongoing conversations in practical theology regarding leadership, stewardship, and the transformation of congregational life.

Building on existing work in sociology and theology, particularly in the areas of racial formation, embodiment, and institutional life, these questions extend current scholarship by examining how these dynamics are lived and reinforced within congregational systems.

The presenting challenges facing congregations are often symptoms of deeper systemic and theological dynamics, as illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1. The crisis beneath the crisis: A layered model of congregational decline and theological formation.

This model demonstrates how visible decline is sustained by underlying systems shaped by theological formation.

CHAPTER ONE

THEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL FOUNDATIONS

Working Definition of Whiteness

In this project, whiteness refers to the historically constructed understanding of God, culture, and moral "rightness" as fundamentally white. It names the way white cultural norms have come to be treated as universal, neutral, and authoritative within the United States. Whiteness shapes what is understood as normal, faithful, rational, and good. This framework centers white, male, heterosexual ways of being and knowing, while positioning women, people of color, LGBTQIA+ persons, and others as secondary, marginal, or "other" in relation to that center.

Whiteness in this sense does not describe individual intent or moral character. It names a cultural and theological system that organizes meaning, power, and belonging. This system often remains unseen by those who benefit from it, even as it continues to shape both church and society.

Understanding whiteness in this way requires recognizing that the category itself did not emerge naturally or biologically. Like race more broadly, whiteness developed through specific historical, social, and economic forces that shaped how people understood identity, belonging, and power.

This matters theologically because what the church comes to treat as normal often becomes what it comes to treat as faithful. When cultural norms are mistaken for theological truth, the church risks forming communities that reflect inherited systems rather than the liberating call of the gospel.

To understand how whiteness functions within the life of the church today, we must examine how racial categories themselves were constructed within the societies that produced them.

Whiteness as Historical and Cultural Formation

Historical Construction, Not Biology

Race is a historical, non-biological construct shaped by the society in which we live. These definitions vary across countries and regions, reflecting cultural and political forces rather than biological realities. I argue that whiteness is a construct formed within the United States through generations of social and economic pressure, functioning to align individuals with the expectations and norms of the dominant culture.[42]

In Racism Without Racists, sixth edition, Eduardo Bonilla-Silva describes a uniquely American framework for interpreting race. He names this framework "color-blind racism," a system that determines who is included and who is excluded while presenting itself as neutral. Within this system, individuals of Anglo-Saxon European descent were classified as white, while others were designated as nonwhite. Race, therefore, operates as a social identifier that shifts over time, redefining who belongs and who does not.[43]

This shifting nature of racial classification operates through the historical experiences of Irish and Jewish communities in the United States. These groups were not initially recognized as white until the late eighteenth to mid-nineteenth centuries. They

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[42] Bonilla-Silva, Racism without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America, 6th ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2022), 42.

[43]Bonilla-Silva, Racism without Racists, 43.

carried distinct cultural markers that positioned them outside the dominant culture. Language, accent, religion, and country of origin all functioned as indicators of difference. Over time, these communities gradually incorporated into the category of whiteness. This shift did not reflect a biological change, but a social reclassification that granted access to political participation and alignment with dominant cultural interests.[44]

This example demonstrates how whiteness operates as a flexible construct. It expands or contracts to maintain power and social control within both society and the church. By redefining who is included, the dominant culture preserves its authority and shapes collective identity.

Whiteness, in this sense, is not about individual morality. It is a system embedded within the fabric of the United States, representing a way of being that prioritizes dominant cultural norms over the experiences and wisdom of marginalized communities. This system continues to influence how individuals participate in both society and the church.

The effects of colonization, slavery, and Jim Crow are not confined to the past. They remain present in contemporary structures and practices. Within the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the 205th General Assembly undertook the work of documenting the history of All-Black governing bodies in its predecessor denominations. This study provides a critical window into the lived experiences of African American Presbyterians

[44] Bonilla-Silva, Racism without Racists, 44.

and reveals how institutional structures both constrained and were reshaped by faithful leadership.[45]

These histories are part of the inheritance the church carries. They shape the present, but they do not have to determine the future. Even within systems marked by exclusion, communities have demonstrated resilience, creativity, and faithfulness.

Understanding whiteness as a historical construct allows the church to engage this inheritance with honesty. Systems formed through colonization, slavery, segregation, and institutional practice continue to shape the ecclesial landscape. Recognizing this reality enables the church to see more clearly how belonging and exclusion have been structured within its common life.

At the same time, these histories point toward possibility. Naming whiteness does not close off the future; it opens space for discernment. It allows the church to confront what has been and to imagine what faithful community can become. As these social patterns developed within American society, they also shaped how Christianity was practiced, organized, and interpreted. The following section explores how these cultural norms became embedded within the theological imagination of the American church. Summary: Whiteness functions as a system that organizes belonging and authority, and this system has been carried into the life of the church.

Cultural Norms Becoming Theological Defaults

[45] All Black Governing Bodies, The History and Contributions of All Black Governing Bodies in the Predecessor Denominations of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) (Louisville: Office of the General Assembly, 1993), 9.

As these racial categories developed within American society, they also began to shape the life and imagination of the church. They influenced how theology was practiced, interpreted, and embodied within Christian communities.

While these dynamics have been identified in broader theological and sociological analyses, this project demonstrates how they function as theological authority within congregational systems, shaping how faithfulness, leadership, and belonging are interpreted in practice.

Despite already being home to millions of Indigenous peoples and cultures, this land was framed by European settlers as a "savage" place in need of colonization. European Christianity was imposed upon the people as the dominant religious framework. The Doctrine of Discovery, issued in the fifteenth century through Papal Bulls of the Roman Catholic Church, declared non-Christian lands to be terra nullius, or "nobody's land." This theological and legal framework opened the door for colonization, genocide, and the assumption that European Christianity was the only legitimate expression of faith.[46]

The claim that European Christianity was the "only way" was not initially framed in racial terms. It was rooted in systems of power, wealth, and control over those who did not worship in alignment with Rome. Long before racial categories of "white" and "black" were formalized in the United States, division was structured primarily around religious identity, Christian versus non-Christian.

Over time, these divisions extended within Christianity itself. Questions emerged around what constituted proper worship and theological correctness. Schisms developed.

[46] Doctrine of Discovery, Papal Bulls (15th century).

Catholics, Orthodox Christians, and Protestants each claimed to represent the true expression of the faith. These divisions were carried into the Americas.

In the early colonial period, survival was the primary concern of European settlers. Over time, as conditions stabilized and Indigenous populations were devastated by diseases brought from Europe, social hierarchies began to develop. The original settlers came seeking freedom to practice their beliefs. As their presence became permanent, however, they also sought to replicate the social and economic conditions of their European contexts. This required labor. European nations supplied that labor by sending individuals from prisons and workhouses to the colonies.

Over time, some of these individuals were able to establish themselves economically and socially. As they rose within the emerging colonial system, they began to adopt the same hierarchical structures they had previously been subjected to. This included the desire to possess labor and status within what was becoming a distinctly "white American" experience.

These shifts reveal that the construction of whiteness is not solely about race, but is deeply tied to economics, religion, and social hierarchy. Cultural norms are not neutral; they are constructed, maintained, and enforced.

This raises an important question: who determines these norms?

In the contemporary United States, these norms are shaped through political processes, economic systems, and cultural influence. As a society, we vote, debate, and use economic power to shape collective life. As Christians, however, we are called to orient our lives according to the teachings of Jesus Christ. As Cynthia Rigby reminds us,

"Jesus loved us so much he came to be with us and for us."[47] Jesus was fully human and fully divine.

In the world of Jesus, Paul, and the early church, diverse cultures interacted regularly. People gathered, lived, and worshiped within complex cultural and religious landscapes. The primary divisions were not racial in the modern sense, but religious, political, and cultural.

In his 1951 work Christ and Culture, H. Richard Niebuhr engages the relationship between Christianity and culture within his historical context. While his language reflects the time in which he wrote, his work provides a valuable framework for understanding how deeply intertwined faith and culture have always been.[48]

These historical and theological developments demonstrate that Christianity has never existed apart from culture. Rather, cultural frameworks have consistently shaped how theology is interpreted, embodied, and institutionalized. The critical question, therefore, is not whether culture influences theology, but how particular cultural norms come to function as authoritative within the life of the church

While Niebuhr helps name the enduring relationship between Christ and culture, contemporary theologians press further by asking whose culture has been centered within that relationship. M. Shawn Copeland, writing from a womanist theological perspective, exposes the limits of dominant theological frameworks by grounding theology in embodied experience.

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[47] Cynthia L. Rigby, Holding Faith: A Practical Introduction to Christian Doctrine (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2019), 31.

[48] H. Richard Niebuhr, Christ and Culture (New York: Harper & Row, 1951), 29.

Her work, rooted in womanist theology, reveals the limitations of dominant theological frameworks by grounding theology in lived experience, particularly the experiences of those historically marginalized by both church and society. In doing so, she invites a broader and more faithful understanding of embodiment, suffering, and divine presence.

The roots of cultural whiteness extend deeply into European Christian history. In 313 CE, Constantine issued the Edict of Milan, ending the persecution of Christians. This was followed by the Council of Nicaea in 325 CE, which established foundational Christian doctrines. In 380 CE, the Edict of Thessalonica declared Nicene Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire.[49]

Within a few centuries, Christianity moved from a marginalized movement centered on a Jewish teacher to the official religion of an empire. This shift profoundly shaped how Christianity would be understood, practiced, and institutionalized.

This history is essential for understanding whiteness as a cultural system with deep roots in European Christian development. It was carried into the Americas, imposed upon Indigenous peoples, and used to justify systems of enslavement and exclusion.

Whiteness operates through institutions, cultural expectations, and inherited theological assumptions. Its effects are not limited to those historically marginalized. It shapes everyone within the system.

[49] Henry Bettenson and Chris Maunder, Documents of the Christian Church, 4th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011) Chapter 2.

Recognizing this reality is a necessary step toward healing. Whiteness has produced generational harm, not only for those oppressed by it, but also for those formed within it.

However, when cultural norms become embedded within theological practice, they begin to shape more than belief. They shape how the church understands worship, leadership, authority, and belonging.

The following example, drawn from sustained ministry observation, illustrates how cultural assumptions function as theological norms within congregational life.

The primary congregation is historically white and led by white leadership, with a smaller nested worshipping community composed largely of members from the African diaspora. They have a nested worshipping community that is small. Perhaps they are predominantly black from the African diaspora. Each Sunday the scripture is read in English by the normal liturgist and the French is read by the pastor or liturgist of the worshipping community.

For a period of time, this arrangement functioned without conflict. Over time, however, members of the dominant congregation began to question the necessity of reading Scripture in multiple languages, revealing underlying assumptions about normativity and belonging.

Members of the dominant congregation questioned the necessity of reading Scripture in multiple languages, reflecting assumptions about normativity and participation. The situation required external consultation as leadership sought to interpret the underlying dynamics at play.

Through this engagement, it became clear that the conversation was not simply about language, but about how belonging was being defined within the congregation. The initial framing centered the preferences of the dominant group, rather than the expressed needs of the immigrant community.

This moment revealed how assumptions about normativity and inclusion were being shaped by dominant cultural expectations. The question was not simply about language, but about who holds authority to define what constitutes meaningful participation in worship. This pattern is not isolated. Across multiple congregational contexts, similar dynamics emerge when dominant cultural assumptions define what is considered normal, appropriate, or meaningful participation in worship and leadership.

Through this engagement, a process emerged that reframed the conversation around belonging rather than accommodation. This shift required re-centering the voices of the immigrant community and integrating this perspective into the shared language and practices of the congregation over time.

This work unfolds gradually and requires sustained attention, honesty, and intentional practice as congregations grow in their understanding of belonging. This example demonstrates how cultural assumptions become theological in practice, shaping not only participation but the recognition of who is called, credible, and authorized within the life of the church.

Rather than beginning with the expressed needs of the immigrant community, the conversation initially centered the preferences of the dominant group. The practice of multilingual worship has deep historical roots within many non-English-speaking congregations, where language functions as an expression of cultural identity and

belonging. These practices reflect longstanding traditions through which communities maintain identity while participating in shared congregational life.

This moment reveals how deeply embedded systems of belonging and authority shape congregational decision-making, often operating beneath the level of conscious intent. As Eduardo Bonilla-Silva argues, racial systems persist through "practices that appear nonracial on the surface," masking the structures that sustain inequality. This pattern reflects what Bonilla-Silva identifies as the normalization of racialized social systems that appear neutral while maintaining existing hierarchies. It further extends Willie James Jennings' argument that Christian imagination has been historically formed in ways that tether authority to particular cultural identities. In this case, congregational decision-making is not simply pragmatic, but theologically and culturally conditioned by inherited assumptions about legitimacy and belonging.[50]

While Bonilla-Silva's framework helps name how racial systems persist through practices that appear neutral, this case reveals how those systems are enacted through theological assumptions about normativity and participation within worship. This extends his analysis by demonstrating that these dynamics are not merely social, but are internalized within the church's understanding of what constitutes meaningful and legitimate participation.

Jennings' work presses this further by exposing how Christian imagination has been formed to associate authority and belonging with particular cultural identities. In this case, the privileging of a single language reflects not simply preference, but a

[50] Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, Racism without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America, 6th ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2022), 37.

theological imagination shaped by dominant cultural norms. What is at stake, therefore, is not language alone, but who is recognized as fully belonging within the worshipping body.

Whiteness operates as a lived system embedded within the structures of both church and society. When left unnamed, it continues to shape assumptions about belonging, authority, and participation in ways that remain largely invisible to those within the dominant culture. Naming these dynamics is therefore not an act of condemnation, but a necessary step toward theological clarity, institutional accountability, and the possibility of faithful reformation within the life of the church.

Summary: Cultural norms, once embedded, function as theological defaults that shape how the church worships, leads, and understands belonging.

Clarification: What Whiteness Is Not

If cultural norms can become embedded within the theological imagination of the church, it is important to clarify what this project does and does not claim. Examining whiteness as a cultural and theological framework is not a claim about individual moral intent directed at individual people. Nor is it an attempt to dismiss the contributions of European Christians or the theological traditions that have shaped the church over centuries. Rather, this work seeks to examine how inherited cultural systems influence the ways Christian communities understand faith, leadership, and belonging.

Reformed theology itself is built on the understanding that human communities are always shaped by both grace and sin. As Daniel Migliore reminds us, Christian theology must continually examine the ways human systems distort our understanding of God and neighbor.

In the Reformed tradition, we often describe the church as reformed and always being reformed according to the Word of God. This principle reflects the willingness of earlier reformers to critique the structures of their own time. Martin Luther and John Calvin challenged the practices of the Roman Catholic Church and the culture it had created both inside and outside the church.

The concept of whiteness in this project therefore names a system rather than a personal moral failing. Human behavior cannot be separated from the societies that form it. The institutions meant to nurture faith and morality, including the church itself, are created and sustained by human communities. While Christians trust in God's guidance, we also acknowledge that all people fall short of the kingdom of God. As Shirley Guthrie reminds us, sin is not limited to individual actions but can also become embedded within social structures that shape communities over time.[51]

Recognizing these patterns does not erase the richness of Christian tradition. Rather, it allows the church to engage its history with honesty and humility. By naming these patterns, we can more clearly identify our own place within the life of the church.

Cynthia Rigby reminds us that the incarnation reveals a God who enters human history fully, meeting humanity within the complexities of culture and society.[52] Naming whiteness as a theological formation is therefore part of the church's broader work of self-examination, confession, and renewal.

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[51] Shirley Guthrie, Christian Doctrine, 349.

[52] Cynthia Rigby, Holding Faith, 71.

Christian theology affirms that all people are created in the image of God. This conviction provides an entry point for asking tough questions about power, colonization, and the systems that continue to shape our communities.

As M. Shawn Copeland reminds us, attention to embodied human experience helps reveal both the dignity and the suffering present within our shared life.[53]

Recognizing the ways cultural systems shape theological understanding opens the door to deeper reflection on how whiteness has formed the practices and assumptions of American Christianity.

Understanding whiteness as a historical and cultural construct provides a necessary foundation. However, these patterns do not remain confined to history or social organization alone. Over time, they become embedded within the theological life of the church itself.

To engage this work faithfully within this project's theological framework, it is necessary to examine how the Reformed tradition itself provides resources for naming, critiquing, and reforming these inherited systems.

From a Reformed theological perspective, sin is not limited to individual actions but is also expressed through systems and structures that shape communal life over time. These patterns become embedded within institutions, influencing how power, belonging, and authority are organized. Naming whiteness as a theological formation therefore requires understanding it not only as a cultural reality, but as a manifestation of systemic sin that distorts relationships within the body of Christ. This distortion is not beyond

[53] Copeland, Enfleshing Freedom, 93.

redemption, but it does require confession, accountability, and intentional participation in the ongoing work of reformation.

Summary: Whiteness names a system, not a personal moral failing, and naming it opens the possibility for faithful reformation.

Reformed Theological Engagement with Culture, Power, and Liberation

This project does not approach questions of whiteness, culture, and power outside the Reformed theological tradition, but from within it. Reformed theology has long emphasized the need for ongoing self-examination within the life of the church. The principle that the church is "reformed and always being reformed according to the Word of God" reflects a willingness to critique inherited structures and practices in light of the Gospel.

Early Reformed theologians such as John Calvin did not write within modern categories of race. However, their theological frameworks provide important grounding for examining systems of power and human brokenness. Calvin's understanding of sin as both personal and systemic offers a lens for recognizing how distorted relationships can become embedded within communal and institutional life. This theological anthropology opens the door for examining how structures of belonging and exclusion take shape over time.

Reformed theology also holds a high view of God's sovereignty alongside a deep awareness of human limitation. This tension invites humility in how the church understands its own traditions and practices. What is received as normative must continually be tested against the witness of Scripture and the lived realities of God's people.

More recent Reformed and post-Reformed theologians have extended this work by engaging questions of culture, embodiment, and liberation more directly. Theological voices attentive to social location and lived experience have challenged the assumption that any single cultural framework can fully represent the body of Christ. These developments do not stand outside the Reformed tradition but emerge as part of its ongoing process of reform.

Engaging whiteness as a theological formation is therefore consistent with Reformed commitments to confession, repentance, and renewal. It reflects the belief that the church must continually examine the ways culture and power shape its life, and must remain open to transformation in response to the Gospel.

CHAPTER TWO

THEOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

This project engages questions of congregational life through an integrated theological framework shaped by the study of whiteness, attentiveness to liberation, and the importance of embodied experience. These are not separate lenses, but interconnected ways of interpreting how theology is lived within the church.

Whiteness functions throughout this project as a theological and cultural framework that shapes how belonging, authority, and normalcy are constructed within congregational life. As demonstrated in the preceding sections, whiteness operates not only as a social system, but as a formative influence on theological imagination, often remaining unnamed while shaping what is perceived as faithful, rational, and normative.

This work also draws on insights consistent with liberation theology, particularly in its attentiveness to those on the margins and its concern for how systems of power shape lived experience. The questions guiding this project, who belongs, who is heard, and how resources are used, emerge from this concern. Liberation, in this sense, is not treated as an abstract category, but as a lived reality that reveals the gap between stated theological commitments and embodied congregational practice.

Embodiment further grounds this work by insisting that theology is not formed in abstraction, but through lived human experience. As explored through the doctrine of the image of God and the work of theologians such as Copeland, the body becomes a site where systems of belonging, exclusion, and dignity are both reinforced and challenged.

Attention to embodiment ensures that this project remains accountable to the real lives shaped by the systems it seeks to examine.

Together, these lenses provide a framework for understanding how theology is not only believed, but enacted. They allow this project to examine congregational life as a space where cultural systems, theological assumptions, and lived experience converge.

Whiteness as Theological Formation

Whiteness functions not only as a social or cultural construct, but as a theological formation shaping how God, humanity, and the church are imagined in the United States. When white cultural norms are treated as neutral or universal, they begin to influence how faith is taught, embodied, and governed.

Over time, this formation becomes normalized and often invisible to those within it, while remaining restrictive for those outside it.

The issue is not the presence of white Christians or the contributions of European theological traditions. Rather, it is the assumption that those traditions represent the default expression of Christianity itself.

Cultural familiarity can be mistaken for theological faithfulness, causing unfamiliar expressions of faith to be treated as secondary.

These assumptions shape how congregations imagine leadership, property, mission, and belonging within the life of the church.

This project builds on the preceding historical and cultural analysis to argue that whiteness operates as a theological formation, shaping not only practice but the imaginative frameworks through which congregations interpret faith, leadership, and

belonging. What the church comes to imagine as normal, it eventually comes to embody as faithful.

Normativity and Theological Imagination

Building on the historical and cultural analysis established in the previous section, the next step is to examine how these systems shape the theological imagination of the church. Cultural frameworks do not remain outside the life of faith. Over time, they influence how communities interpret scripture, organize leadership, manage resources, and understand belonging within the body of Christ.

Jennings has shown how racial imagination has historically shaped Christian identity and theological formation, particularly within Western contexts.[54]

Building on Jennings' analysis, this project extends that work by examining how these dynamics are enacted within congregational leadership, worship, and resource practices in contemporary mainline contexts.

When a particular cultural experience becomes dominant, it can function as the assumed norm through which theology is practiced and understood. In the United States, the cultural framework described as whiteness has often operated in this way. It quietly shapes expectations about authority, property, mission, and community life within Christian institutions.

Recognizing this formation does not diminish the richness of Christian tradition. Rather, it allows the church to examine more honestly how inherited cultural patterns influence how faith is lived and embodied within congregational life.

[54] Jennings, The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), Chapter 3.

In the North American church, Jesus is often depicted as a white, blond-haired, blue-eyed figure. For many, this image formed part of their earliest understanding of Jesus. The image I refer to as "my grandma's Jesus" has been present across generations. This familiar portrait, known as "The Head of Christ," often called the "Sallman Head," was painted in 1940 by Warner Sallman.[55]

Created by a white artist for a predominantly white church, the image became embedded within American Christian culture. Creating images of God, Jesus, saints, and celestial beings in the likeness of the communities that produce them is a tradition as old as religious art itself.

Art has long provided a window into the culture of religious communities. Throughout Christian history, paintings, sculptures, icons, frescoes, mosaics, and music have served as ways to interpret scripture and communicate theological ideas, particularly in communities where many people could not read. In this sense, creating sacred art in the image of the artist's own culture has long been a meaningful and faithful practice.

The expectation that sacred figures should reflect historically accurate racial or ethnic features is often perceived as new, particularly within a white-dominated society. In many Orthodox traditions, sacred icons continue to reflect the cultural and ethnic identities of the communities that produce them.

By contrast, Roman Catholic and Protestant traditions in North America often inherited their visual theology from European artistic traditions. Over time, these imported European images, particularly those depicting a white European Jesus, became normalized within American Christian imagination.

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[55]Warner Sallman, The Head of Christ (1940).

It is important to state clearly that depicting Jesus in culturally familiar ways is not inherently problematic. The challenge arises when one cultural depiction becomes so dominant that others are dismissed or ignored.

As M. Shawn Copeland argues, Christian theology must attend to the dignity and sacredness of embodied human life.[56] When the church consistently centers one type of body as the primary reflection of holiness, other bodies can become invisible within the theological imagination of the community.

This does not remain theoretical; it shapes congregational life, including who is trusted, who is recognized as a leader, and whose voice carries authority within the community.

Worship Practices

From the moment Christianity arrived on the American continent, it was often prioritized above other faith traditions. European settlers came seeking religious freedom. However, the consequences of colonization produced deep harm for Native peoples and contributed to the formation of systems of slavery and racial hierarchy that continue to shape American society.

The cultural norms brought by early European colonizers shaped many of the practices that define Christian worship in North America. Among these was the expectation of a fixed church building.

[56] Copeland, Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2023), 15.

Indigenous communities already possessed deeply rooted spiritual traditions, sacred spaces, and cultural practices. After colonization, many of these traditions were suppressed or outlawed.

Despite this diversity, many continue to imagine “church” through a white European model; a dedicated building, formal seating, and Sunday worship.

Worship practices reflected these developments. Musical traditions evolved alongside wealth and stability. Organs and pianos became markers of “proper” worship. Seating arrangements reflected social hierarchy.

These patterns demonstrate how cultural assumptions about worship gradually became interpreted as theological norms. What began as contextual practice came to be perceived as universal.

Leadership and Authority

Education has long been treated as a requirement for authority within the Christian church. In the mainline Protestant traditions that emerged during the founding of the United States, formal theological education became an expected pathway into ministry.

These imported structures often stood in contrast to leadership traditions present among many Indigenous and African cultures, where leadership was frequently more communal or included strong female leadership.

Over time, white male leadership became normalized as the default model within both church and society, shaping expectations of authority and legitimacy.

As Carolyn Helsel argues, those who benefit from these systems must participate in the work of examining and dismantling them.[57]

If these systems were formed, they can also be reformed. Faithful leadership requires expanding who leads, how authority is shared, and how leadership is recognized within the life of the church.

Stewardship and Resources

In the ministry of Jesus, we encounter a relational model of shared resources. Jesus moved from place to place, supported by networks of hospitality and community.

As the church became institutionalized, systems of land, wealth, and power became increasingly intertwined with religious life.

Jesus' teaching in Luke 12:15–21 cautions against the accumulation of wealth and the illusion of security found in material abundance.[58]

As Elsdon observes, many congregations are "asset rich and cash poor," holding significant property but lacking the resources needed for active ministry.[59]

This reveals a deeper issue: the problem is not simply financial, but theological.

When shaped by inherited systems, resources are often treated as something to preserve rather than something to share.

This shift requires moving from preservation toward participation, from control toward trust, and from accumulation toward shared life.

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[57] Carolyn B. Helsel, Anxious to Talk About It: Helping White Christians Talk Faithfully About Racism (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2020), 7.

[58] Luke 12:15–21.

[59] Elsdon, We Aren't Broke, 62.

If whiteness shapes the theological imagination of the church, its influence extends beyond structures and practices into how communities understand God, humanity, and holiness itself. These assumptions are most clearly revealed in how the church interprets and embodies the doctrine of the image of God. Examining this doctrine provides a critical lens for understanding how cultural formation shapes theological meaning.

Whiteness & the Image of God

While questions of leadership, authority, and stewardship reveal how cultural systems shape the structures of church life, they also influence something even deeper: the theological imagination of the community itself. The ways congregations organize authority, steward resources, and interpret tradition shape how they imagine holiness, belonging, and ultimately the image of God reflected in human life. When cultural norms become embedded within institutions, they can quietly begin to define what appears natural, faithful, and sacred within the life of the church.

To understand how whiteness operates within American Christianity, this project examines how these inherited cultural frameworks influence the church's understanding of the Imago Dei, the belief that all people are created in the image of God

Imago Dei in Christian Doctrine

Christian theology teaches that all people are made in the image of God. This is not a secondary claim; it is foundational to how the church understands dignity, belonging, and community. Yet images of God and Christ within American churches have often mirrored white cultural imagery. Over generations, this has subtly reinforced

an association between holiness, authority, and whiteness that many congregations inherit without questioning.

When whiteness becomes entangled with the image of God, the church's theological imagination begins to narrow. God becomes culturally familiar rather than radically transcendent. Naming whiteness in this context is therefore not an act of accusation but an act of theological honesty.

Systematic and practical theologians invite the church to take the doctrine of the image of God seriously by examining how theology is lived out in real communities.[60]

At the same time, human beings inevitably interpret the world through the cultural lenses they inherit. Recognizing this limitation requires humility and a willingness to examine how our own cultural assumptions shape the ways we see God and one another.

When distorted, the image of God becomes culturally narrowed and subtly associated with whiteness and dominant norms. When restored, the image of God is recognized as fully present across the diversity of humanity.

Visual Theology & Representation

Theological imagination is not formed through doctrine alone. It is also shaped through the images, symbols, and artistic traditions that surround Christian worship.

When certain cultural depictions of Christ become dominant, they begin to influence how the church understands the image of God itself.

[60]Daniel Migliore; Shirley Guthrie; Cynthia Rigby.

Images of Christ portrayed as white are not inherently wrong; they become limiting when they function as the primary or only representation within Christian communities.

Throughout history, the repeated "whitening" of biblical figures has contributed to theological and cultural distortion. Over time, these patterns contributed to narratives that associated whiteness with goodness and holiness.

As M. Shawn Copeland argues, theological reflection must attend to embodiment, particularly the ways race and lived experience shape how the image of God is encountered in the world.[61]

Copeland's work on embodiment provides a critical theological grounding for this project, which extends her insights by examining how embodied experience is either affirmed or constrained within congregational systems shaped by whiteness.

The Narrowing of Imagination

In Matthew 22:36–40, Jesus names the greatest commandment: to love God fully and to love one's neighbor as oneself.[62] When the images we use to represent God are narrowed to a single cultural expression, we risk limiting our ability to see and love our neighbors fully.

Christian theology insists that the image of God cannot be confined to a single body or culture.

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[61] Copeland, Enfleshing Freedom, 53.

[62] Matthew 22:36–40.

The incarnation deepens this claim. Jesus did not enter the world as an abstract idea but as a fully embodied human being.

Representation matters because images shape imagination. One of the most recognizable images of Jesus in American Christianity is the 1940 painting Head of Christ by Warner Sallman, which continues to shape popular imagination.[63]

Copeland reminds us that the broken body of Jesus connects believers to the suffering experienced by real human bodies under systems of power.[64]

In John 20:24–29, the wounds of Christ become a testimony to resurrection, not something erased.[65]

Every body, regardless of ability, race, or identity, bears the image of God and must be recognized as such within the life of the church.

When the image of God is shaped by cultural assumptions, the consequences are not merely representational but theological. Distortions in how the church imagines God and humanity inevitably shape how it lives, leads, and relates. Christian theology names these distortions as sin, not only in individual actions, but in the systems and structures that organize communal life. It is within this framework that whiteness must be examined as a theological reality within the life of the church.

Whiteness and Sin

When the church's imagination of the image of God becomes narrowed by cultural assumptions, the consequences extend beyond representation. Distorted images

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[63] Warner Sallman, The Head of Christ (1940).

[64] Copeland, 41.

[65] John 20:24–29.

of holiness begin to shape how communities recognize dignity, authority, and belonging. What begins as cultural inheritance develops into patterns that privilege some while marginalizing others.

In this way, the narrowing of theological imagination becomes more than a cultural concern; it becomes a theological one. Christian theology names these distortions as sin, not only in individual actions, but in the systems and structures that shape communal life.

If whiteness functions as a framework that shapes imagination, authority, and belonging, it must be examined theologically as part of the church's participation in sin. Engaging this reality is not an act of accusation, but an invitation into confession, repentance, and transformation

Classical Understanding of Sin

Sin is a central concept within Christian theology. It shapes how the church understands human nature and the need for redemption. At its core, sin is a turning away from God; a distortion of relationship rather than a complete separation. Scripture reminds us that nothing can separate us from the love of God (Romans 8:38–39).[66]

Within the Reformed tradition, John Calvin describes sin as a "hereditary corruption" that inclines humanity toward patterns of brokenness.[67] Shirley Guthrie expands this understanding, naming the tension at the heart of sin; it is both universal and inevitable, yet each person remains responsible for their participation.[68]

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[66] Romans 8:38–39.

[67] John Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion.

[68] Shirley Guthrie, Christian Doctrine, 40.

"Daniel Migliore further develops this claim by emphasizing how sin takes shape within social structures and communal life."[69] Cynthia Rigby reminds us that recognizing both the goodness of creation and the depth of sin calls the church into a prophetic stance; one that resists what is broken while participating in God's work of restoration.[70]

Sin, therefore, is both personal and systemic. It shapes relationships, institutions, and the conditions in which human life unfolds.

This classical understanding of sin establishes its depth and universality. However, if sin is understood only at the level of individual action, it remains incomplete. To fully engage its impact, we must consider how sin operates beyond the individual and takes shape within shared patterns of life.

Sin Beyond the Individual

Sin is not limited to individual wrongdoing. It takes shape within patterns and systems that distort relationships with God and neighbor. "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23).[71] Yet this does not mean humanity is devoid of goodness. Cynthia Rigby reminds us that scripture must be read expansively, holding together both human brokenness and the affirmation that creation is good.[72]

The Christian life is not about denying sin. It is about reorientation; turning toward God and away from the patterns that distort relationship.

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[69] Daniel Migliore, Faith Seeking Understanding, 139.

[70] Cynthia Rigby, Holding Faith, 169.

[71] Romans 3:23.

[72] Cynthia Rigby, 170.

If sin shapes patterns of behavior, it also shapes the systems those patterns create. Over time, what begins as individual distortion becomes embedded within institutions and communal life. It is within this movement that sin becomes structural, shaping the conditions in which communities live and act.

Sin Embedded in Systems

Sin does not remain confined to individual choices. It becomes embedded within institutions, traditions, and communal practices. What begins as individual behavior becomes normalized over time. These patterns shape how communities organize power, define belonging, and interpret faith.

This is why the Reformed tradition insists the church is "reformed and always being reformed." Faithfulness requires examining not only personal behavior, but also the systems we inherit and sustain. Shirley Guthrie names this inherited sin; realities we did not create, yet still participate in.[73]

Institutions may not actively perpetuate harm in the present, yet they may still benefit from past injustice. Whether through land, wealth, or social position, the effects of sin remain embedded within systems over time.

Recognizing sin as embedded within systems raises a necessary theological response. If these patterns are shared, then the response to them cannot be individual alone. The church must respond corporately, naming its participation in these systems through practices of confession and accountability.

Corporate Confession and Shared Responsibility

[73] Shirley Guthrie, 212.

The Reformed tradition responds to this reality through corporate confession. The church confesses together, not because each individual has committed every act, but because all participate in the systems that make those acts possible.

In naming these realities, the church situates itself honestly within the world as it is.

When the church proclaims, “Hear the good news, we are forgiven,” it does not escape responsibility. It acknowledges that God’s grace meets us within shared brokenness and calls us toward renewed life.

Nothing can separate us from the love of God. Yet we remain called to confront the realities of sin shaping communal life.

Corporate confessions do not remain in liturgical language alone. It reveals itself in how the church orders its life, particularly in how authority, voice, and leadership are recognized and sustained within the community.

Sin in Church Life

These patterns of sin become visible in how authority and voice are prioritized within the church.

In the American context, the white European male voice has often been treated as normative and authoritative. This assumption has been reinforced through theological education, institutional structures, and cultural expectations.

The result is the marginalization of those who do not fit this norm; women, people of color, queer individuals, and those with disabilities. These exclusions are not always intentional. However, they reflect inherited systems that define who is recognized as legitimate within the life of the church.

Inherited Patterns and Personal Location

These are learned patterns. No one is born understanding exclusion, racism, or bias. These behaviors are passed down through communities, often by those who believe they are acting faithfully. In this way, sin is both personal and inherited.

As an ordained Minister of Word and Sacrament in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), I am able to live fully into my call in ways that would not be possible in all traditions.[74]

This contrast reveals how deeply cultural norms shape theological interpretation and ecclesial practice.

These lived experiences are not isolated observations. They point toward broader patterns shaping both church and society. To understand their full significance, they must be named within the larger system in which they operate.

Whiteness as Systemic Sin

Examining these realities demonstrates how whiteness operates as a system within both church and society. It shapes what is considered normal, authoritative, and acceptable, often functioning without being named. In doing so, it orders belonging, access, and decision-making in ways that appear neutral while reinforcing existing patterns of power.

This raises necessary questions: Who is present? Who is missing? Who can fully participate? These are not simply questions of attendance or representation, but of power, access, and authority within the life of the community.

[74] Devon M. Reynolds, personal ministry context.

Belonging cannot be reduced to welcome alone. Without full participation and shared authority, systems remain intact, continuing to reproduce the very exclusions they claim to overcome.

This project also recognizes that conversations around embodiment, identity, and power are not monolithic. Feminist and womanist theological traditions, while often in conversation, emerge from distinct historical and lived realities. Womanist theology, in particular, names the experiences of Black women and challenges frameworks that fail to account for the intersection of race, gender, and embodied difference.

In addition, queer, Indigenous, and disability theologies expand this conversation by attending to the ways identity, body, culture, and ability shape how individuals and communities experience belonging, exclusion, and the presence of God. These perspectives expose the limitations of dominant theological frameworks and make visible what those frameworks often leave unexamined.

While these traditions significantly inform this project's understanding of embodiment and marginalization, they are not engaged as primary methodological frameworks. Instead, they function as critical conversation partners that deepen the analysis while remaining beyond the central scope defined by this project's research questions and practical theological approach.

Naming these perspectives is essential. It reinforces the central claim of this work: no single theological framework can account for the complexity of lived experience within the body of Christ. Faithful theological reflection must therefore remain attentive to voices that have been historically marginalized, not as an optional supplement, but as a necessary component of theological integrity.

Naming these systems is only the beginning. Christian theology calls the church not only to recognition, but to response. This response requires practices that move beyond awareness toward transformation, engaging the structures that shape congregational life rather than merely addressing their visible effects.

Confession, Repentance, and Transformation

Christian theology does not leave the church at the point of diagnosis. It calls the church into response.

Confession becomes truth-telling; naming what has long gone unspoken. Repentance becomes reorientation; turning toward practices that reflect justice, repair, and right relationship.

This work requires more than awareness. It requires action. Practices such as land acknowledgment, institutional repair, and restructuring leadership must move beyond symbolic gestures.

This work, however, is not without consequence. The movement toward transformation requires confronting the realities that sustain these systems and the cost of relinquishing them.

The Cost and Call of Transformation

The work of dismantling inherited systems is not easy. It requires honesty, humility, and a willingness to relinquish control.

These systems do not simply limit progress; they wound the body of Christ.

We do not serve only the Christ on the cross; we serve the risen Christ of the empty tomb. The resurrection does not erase the wounds of crucifixion. Christ bears those wounds even in resurrection.[75]

Confession and repentance do not remove the wounds left by sin. They open the possibility for transformation. It is in this space, between wound and healing, that the church is called to live.

Examining whiteness as a manifestation of systemic sin reveals how deeply these patterns are embedded within the life of the church. However, these systems do not exist in abstraction. They are experienced in bodies, relationships, and communities shaped by harm, exclusion, and survival. To fully engage this reality, we must turn to the language of trauma and embodiment, recognizing how these wounds are carried and revealed within the life of the church.

Trauma, Embodiment, and the Wounded Christ

The work of confession and repentance does not resolve the wounds created by sin; it reveals them. These systems do not exist in abstraction. They are carried in bodies, communities, and memories shaped by harm, exclusion, and survival.

Christian theology does not offer a vision of healing that forgets. It proclaims a crucified and risen Christ whose wounds remain visible. Engaging whiteness theologically therefore requires grappling with trauma; not as something to be quickly

[75] John 20:24–29.

resolved, but as a reality that must be acknowledged, held, and understood in light of the wounded and living Christ.[76]

Trauma as Theological Reality

According to the American Psychological Association, trauma is often defined as an experience that produces lasting disruption in a person's life and relationships. While helpful, this definition does not fully capture its theological depth.[77]

In this project, trauma is understood as the lingering, embodied impact of sin; both personal and systemic. It distorts relationships with God and neighbor and is carried within individuals, communities, and inherited structures over time.[78]

Theologically, trauma is revealed in the wounded body of Christ. The crucifixion exposes the violence of human systems. The resurrection, in which Christ still bears scars, reveals that such wounds are not erased but carried forward.[79]

Trauma, therefore, cannot be spiritualized away. It must be acknowledged and engaged within the life of the church. To ignore trauma is to deny the fullness of Christ's embodiment. To attend to it is to participate in God's work of healing and restoration.

Trauma shapes how people relate to one another, to institutions, and to God. This requires a trauma-informed pastoral approach; one that recognizes both the importance

[76] Rambo, Resurrecting Wounds, 109.

[77] American Psychological Association, definition of trauma.

[78] Shirley Guthrie, Christian Doctrine, 212.

[79] John 20:24–29.

and limits of pastoral care. As Dr. Phil Helsel teaches, when care extends beyond what pastoral presence can hold, it must be shared with trained professionals.[80]

If trauma is understood as an embodied and enduring reality, it must be examined through the central event of Christian faith. The crucifixion of Jesus provides not only a theological claim, but a concrete expression of violence, suffering, and power.

The Cross and the Reality of Violence

The death of Jesus is not abstract theology; it is a historically rooted act of violence. Crucifixion was designed to instill fear, enforce control, and silence resistance. The foundation of Christian faith is therefore rooted in trauma.

Jesus' ministry, centered on love of God and neighbor, stood in direct opposition to imperial systems. His execution reveals the cost of that resistance.

The question for the church is not whether trauma exists, but how it is held. Faith does not call us to bypass suffering, but to encounter God within it.

Yet the story does not end with the cross. The resurrection does not erase what has occurred. Instead, it reframes it, revealing a Christ who carries wounds forward into new life.

Wounds That Remain

The resurrection does not erase the wounds of the cross. As Shelly Rambo emphasizes, the risen Christ still bears the marks of crucifixion.[81] In John 20, Thomas is

[80]Phil Helsel, pastoral care teaching (course context).

[81] Rambo, Resurrecting Wounds, 113.

invited to touch those wounds. His response is not doubt alone, but an embodied need to encounter truth through experience.[82]

The women at the tomb offer another witness. Though they were the first to encounter the resurrection, they were not believed. This reflects a compounded trauma; not only loss, but the dismissal of truth.

Trauma is not only what happens to the body. It is also what happens when experience is silenced or ignored.

These wounds are not only theological symbols. They point toward a deeper truth about human experience. Trauma is carried not in abstraction, but within the body itself.

Embodiment and the Human Experience

Human bodies carry trauma. The incarnation reveals that God entered the world through a body; fully experiencing vulnerability, limitation, and pain.[83]

As M. Shawn Copeland reminds us, embodiment is central to understanding both suffering and divine presence.[84] Yet the church often struggles to honor this truth. Pain is minimized or rushed past in the name of hope.

Trauma does not disappear when ignored. It continues to shape trust, belonging, and faith.

If trauma is carried within individual bodies, it is also carried within the collective body of the church. Communities, like individuals, bear the marks of their history.

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[82] John 20:24–29.

[83]John 1:14.

[84]Copeland, Enfleshing Freedom, 111.

The Church as a Wounded Body

The church itself bears wounds. A community meant to embody grace has also been a source of exclusion, harm, and distrust. These wounds are not only historical; they are present. Communities shaped by racism, patriarchy, and exclusion carry trauma that continues to influence congregational life.

Naming this reality is not condemnation. It is truth-telling.

Naming the wounds of the church is necessary, but it is not sufficient. The deeper challenge lies in how the church responds to those wounds, particularly when it fails to hold them with honesty and care.

The Failure to Hold Trauma

Too often, the church prefers resurrection without remaining at the cross. Difficult conversations are avoided. Pain is minimized. Reality is labeled "too political." This avoidance does not heal wounds; it deepens them.

Recent history has revealed this clearly. Moments such as the COVID-19 pandemic exposed the church's struggle to hold collective grief and fear.[85]

In my first call as Head Pastor, I encountered this directly. During the pandemic, I transitioned the congregation into online worship to maintain connection and care. Yet beneath that adaptation, deeper patterns emerged.

Questions shifted from care to control. Why are we not in the sanctuary? Why does worship look different? Why are decisions not being made the way they always have been?

[85] Contemporary pastoral context (COVID-19).

What surfaced was not simply resistance to change, but a system in which financial power shaped authority. Certain families expected influence based on giving, often outside shared governance.

Within a Presbyterian system, authority belongs to the Session. Yet over time, that authority had shifted toward informal control. This is what unaddressed trauma can look like. Patterns of control become normalized. Systems go unquestioned. Disruption is met with resistance rooted in fear and loss.

My role was not to resolve the system, but to name it. Once named, it could no longer remain hidden.

Generational Trauma and Whiteness

When these patterns remain unaddressed, they become generational. The trauma of whiteness is not confined to a moment in history. It is carried forward through institutions, cultural expectations, and lived experience. It shapes belonging, authority, and trust; often long after its origins are forgotten.

Whiteness functions by normalizing certain experiences while marginalizing others. Over time, this produces patterns of distrust and exclusion within the body of Christ.

Naming generational trauma is not about blame. It is about truth. Without naming, patterns remain hidden and continue to reproduce themselves.

Staying with the Wound

Healing does not come from avoiding trauma, but from remaining present within it.

The wounded Christ invites the church into presence rather than escape. This requires listening, witnessing, and allowing pain to be named without rushing toward resolution.

We do not serve only the Christ of the cross; we serve the risen Christ. Resurrection does not erase wounds. It transforms how they are carried.[86]

It is within this tension, between wound and resurrection, that hope emerges.

If confronting whiteness requires naming sin and attending to trauma, it also requires asking what it means to move forward faithfully.

Christian theology does not end with confession. It proclaims resurrection. Yet resurrection does not erase the wounds of the cross; it transforms them. Hope begins with honesty. It is the willingness to look at the broken body of Christ and trust that we are not abandoned. Jesus does not hide his wounds. He carries them into resurrection. In doing so, he reveals that healing does not come through forgetting, but through transformation.[87]

As Amy Kenny argues, bodies are not problems to be fixed but expressions of God's creative design. The issue is not the body, but the systems that define certain bodies as normative and others as lacking. This reframing expands the church's imagination of wholeness and challenges the assumptions that have shaped belonging within Christian communities.[88]

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[86]John 20:24–29.

[87]John 20:24–29.

[88] Amy Kenny, My Body Is Not a Prayer Request, 20.

What might the church look like if it took this seriously? What if our spaces reflected the communities around us; not as they once were, but as they are now? Naming whiteness is not the end of the work. It is the beginning of reimagining faithful community.

This reimagining touches leadership, worship, authority, and belonging. It invites the church to move from preservation toward participation in God's ongoing work. Our congregations already possess the resources needed for this transformation. The issue is not scarcity, but imagination. When viewed through abundance, the church begins to see its resources; financial, relational, and spiritual, as gifts to be shared rather than preserved.[89]

This exposes one way whiteness has shaped the church; prioritizing accumulation over generosity.

As Elsdon and others note, many churches are resource-rich but mission-constrained. This is not a failure of resources, but of how they are understood. Addressing this requires more than intention. It requires embodied change. When leadership shares power, reallocates resources, and expands participation, transformation begins to take root.[90]

We are reminded in worship: "Hear the good news, we are forgiven." This does not free us from responsibility. It frees us for renewal. We are not bound to be the church of the past. We are the people of God; called into healing, reconciliation, and new life. The Spirit continues to move among us, bringing disruption, creativity, and hope.

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[89]Theological framing of abundance (see Luke 12:15–21).

[90] Elsdon, We Aren't Broke, 89.

The question is no longer whether the church can change, but whether it is willing to become more faithful to the God it proclaims.

The theological and historical work of this project has named the systems shaping the life of the church, but naming alone is not sufficient. If these patterns are to be engaged faithfully, they must be met with practices that move beyond diagnosis toward transformation.

This project therefore turns toward a practical theological response. What follows is not a programmatic solution, but a framework for engaging congregational life in ways that are attentive, relational, and adaptive. It emerges from lived ministry, shaped by observation, experience, and theological reflection within real congregational contexts.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

This project is a work of practical theology grounded in lived ministry experience. It emerges from the conviction that theological reflection does not take place only in academic settings, but within the everyday realities of congregational life. This work comes out of my experience working across multiple congregations across multiple states. I have done ministry in Alabama, Tennessee, Texas, Oklahoma, and now serve fifty-seven congregations across parts of three different states.

The claims developed in the previous sections are not abstract arguments; they are drawn from sustained engagement with communities navigating questions of leadership, belonging, stewardship, and identity within the contemporary church.

As such, this project moves intentionally from theological diagnosis to embodied practice. It seeks not only to name how whiteness functions within the life of the church, but to explore how those patterns might be reimagined through concrete, relational, and adaptive forms of ministry.

Research Design and Methodological Framework

Research Design

This project employs a qualitative research design grounded in practical theology and ministry-based observation. Because this project is grounded in practical theology and lived ministry, I retain a first-person voice throughout in order to name my role as both participant and interpreter within the research process. Qualitative research is particularly appropriate for this study because it seeks to understand how meaning, belief, and practice are formed within lived congregational contexts. Rather than measuring

outcomes quantitatively, this approach allows for close attention to the ways systems of belonging, leadership, and stewardship are experienced, interpreted, and enacted within the life of the church.

My research design emerges directly from the realities of ministry rather than from a controlled or experimental setting. As such, this work draws on a case-based approach, engaging multiple congregational contexts in order to identify recurring patterns across diverse settings. The selection of these cases is not random but arises from my role within a connectional church structure, which provides sustained access to congregations navigating leadership transitions, financial strain, and adaptive challenges. These contexts offer a representative range of ministry environments, including rural, small-town, and urban-adjacent congregations, allowing for both comparison and contrast in how systems of whiteness, belonging, and resource stewardship are expressed.

Sampling and Case Selection

Sampling in this project is therefore best understood as purposeful and practice based. Congregations included in this study were engaged through ongoing ministry relationships rather than detached observation. This approach allows for deeper insight into congregational life over time, including moments of stability, conflict, and transition. The selection of cases reflects both typical and critical instances of congregational life within the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), particularly among predominantly white congregations facing questions of identity, sustainability, and mission.

Data Collection

Data collection for this study is rooted in the ordinary practices of ministry. These include sustained pastoral and collegial conversations, observation of congregational

leadership processes, participation in meetings and decision-making spaces, and review of congregational materials such as budgets, reports, and organizational structures. These sources provide multiple points of access to how congregations understand and enact their life together. Because this work is relational and ongoing, data is not gathered at a single point in time but across extended engagement, allowing patterns to emerge with greater clarity and depth.

This study maintains a distinction between observation and interpretation. Observation refers to the concrete realities of congregational life, including conversations, leadership decisions, conflicts, and organizational practices. Interpretation occurs only after patterns of recurrence have been identified and these observations are brought into conversation with theological and sociological frameworks. This distinction ensures that conclusions emerge from sustained engagement rather than assumption.

Data Analysis

Data analysis in this project follows an inductive, pattern-based approach. Rather than beginning with a fixed hypothesis, I identify recurring themes across congregational contexts, particularly in relation to power, belonging, leadership, and stewardship. I compare observations across cases to discern both common dynamics and contextual differences. These patterns are then brought into conversation with theological reflection, allowing me to interpret not only what is happening within congregations, but why these patterns persist and how they are theologically formed.

In this study, a pattern is not identified through isolated recurrence alone, but through consistency across variation. A dynamic is considered a pattern when it appears across multiple congregational contexts while maintaining a recognizable underlying

mechanism, even as surface conditions such as geography, size, or leadership structure differ. This allows the study to distinguish between anecdotal experience and systemic dynamics shaping congregational life.

Researcher Positionality and Reflexivity

My role in this research is both participatory and interpretive. As an Executive Presbyter within the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), I occupy a position of relational proximity to the congregations being studied. This insider position provides access to the lived realities of congregational life that would not be available through external observation alone. At the same time, this proximity requires careful attention to reflexivity. My own experiences, social location, and theological commitments shape both what I observe and how I interpret it. Rather than attempting to remove this influence, this project names it as an integral part of the research process, consistent with qualitative research and practical theology.

Trustworthiness and Credibility

Trustworthiness in this study is established through sustained engagement, triangulation of sources, and consistency of observed patterns across multiple contexts. My ongoing relationships with congregations allow for repeated observation over time rather than reliance on isolated events. Insights are confirmed through multiple forms of data, including conversations, observations, and documentary materials. Additionally, the recurrence of similar patterns across diverse congregational settings strengthens the credibility of the findings.

The credibility of this study is further strengthened by the scale and duration of engagement. Working across more than fifty congregations over multiple years allows

patterns to be observed, tested, and refined across diverse contexts rather than inferred from a single or isolated case. This sustained, multi-site engagement provides a level of comparative depth that supports the reliability of the findings.

Methodological Integration and Transition to Praxis

This methodological framework provides structural grounding for the work that follows. While this section names the research design in formal terms, the following section articulates how this methodology is enacted through the practices of ministry. It is within that praxis that these methods take shape, are tested, and are refined in real time.

Case Selection and Study Contexts

This study draws on multiple congregational contexts as case studies in order to examine how systems of whiteness, belonging, and stewardship function across diverse ministry settings. These cases were selected through my role within a connectional church structure, which provides sustained access to congregations navigating leadership transitions, financial strain, and adaptive challenges. The selection is therefore purposeful and practice-based rather than random, allowing for both depth of engagement and comparative insight across contexts.

Practical Theology as Praxis

This project employs a practical theological approach rooted in qualitative observation, lived ministry experience, and case-based reflection. Theological insight in this work arises through sustained engagement with congregational life rather than detached analysis. The purpose of this approach is to surface the underlying dynamics,

relationships, and formative influences shaping leadership, belonging, stewardship, and identity within the contemporary church.

This project draws on qualitative attentiveness to congregational life, focusing on how decisions unfold, how resources are engaged, how authority is negotiated, and how participation is experienced. These insights are not gathered through formal interviews or surveys, but through ongoing pastoral presence, leadership, and participation within the rhythms of church life.

Because I serve at the intersection of local congregations, mid council leadership, and broader social contexts, this work is carried out primarily through active observation and relational engagement. I listen for language that signals scarcity or abundance, attend to whose voices carry influence and whose are diminished, and observe how decisions take shape within existing structures of power. This work is inherently collaborative; I regularly engage in reflection with presbytery leadership teams, tracing connections and tensions across multiple congregations and ministry settings.

Working beyond a single congregational context allows patterns to become more visible over time. I engage regularly with stewardship teams, capital planning processes, and mission development efforts. Within these spaces, I pay close attention to points of intersection, where relationships, resources, and imagination converge or break down. I record these engagements through notes and reflective practice, not to produce statistical conclusions, but to discern relational and systemic dynamics that inform faithful leadership across contexts.

The material for this project emerges from lived ministry, ongoing congregational engagement, and sustained interaction across multiple settings. This includes pastoral

leadership within individual congregations, as well as my current role serving fifty-seven congregations across multiple states. This dual vantage point provides both depth and scope: depth through long-term relationships within particular communities, and scope through repeated exposure to shared challenges, patterns, and opportunities across a broader ecclesial landscape.

Additional sources include case studies drawn from prior ministry contexts, current leadership within the presbytery, and denominational and national reporting. These sources function as interpretive lenses rather than standalone data points, helping to illuminate the lived realities of congregations and the systems in which they are embedded.

This approach is inherently interpretive and theological. It understands congregational life as a site where theological meaning is both formed and revealed. It asks how inherited systems shape the church's imagination and how those systems might be named, interrupted, and reoriented toward more faithful expressions of communal life. While the findings are not intended to be universally generalizable, they reflect recurring dynamics observed across multiple contexts and are offered as a faithful account of lived ecclesial experience.

While the research design establishes a framework for identifying and interpreting these dynamics, the sections that follow articulate how this work takes shape in practice through a practical theological framework grounded in ministry.

The methodological approach guiding this project is cyclical rather than linear, as illustrated in Figure 2.

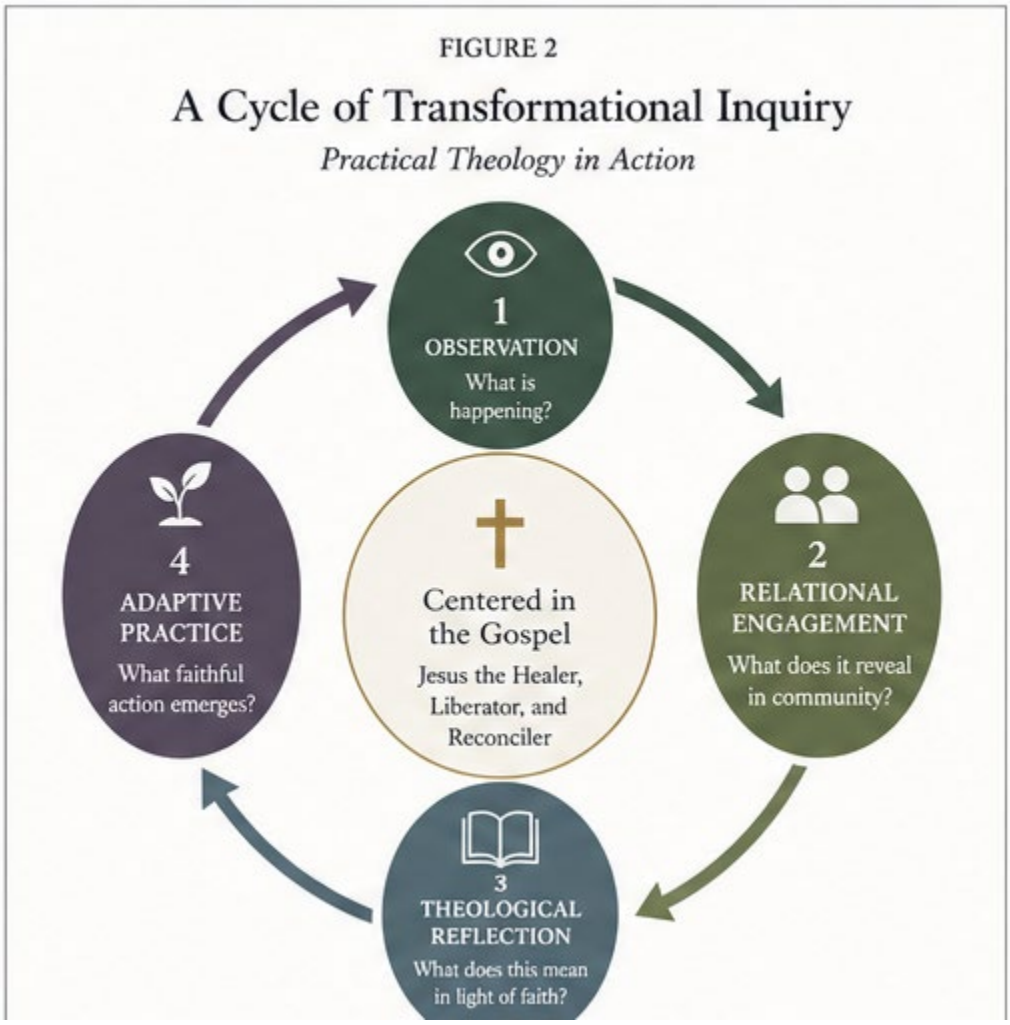

Figure 2. A cycle of transformational inquiry: Practical theology as a sustained process of discernment and action.

Each movement within the cycle builds upon the previous, reinforcing a pattern of ongoing discernment and adaptive practice within congregational life.

CHAPTER FOUR

PRACTICAL THEOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK FOR CONGREGATIONAL REIMAGINING

In response to the patterns identified across congregational contexts, this project proposes a practical theological framework for congregational reimagining. This framework is grounded in the recurring dynamics of belonging, leadership, stewardship, and imagination observed throughout this study.

It is structured as a cyclical process consisting of four interrelated movements: observation, relational engagement, theological reflection, and adaptive practice.

This project emerges from the conviction that the challenges facing the church are not primarily problems of decline, but of imagination. As explored in the previous sections, whiteness functions as a theological and cultural formation that shapes how congregations understand leadership, belonging, and stewardship. These patterns are often reinforced through inherited assumptions about resources, authority, and institutional preservation.

The purpose of this project is not simply to critique these patterns, but to offer a practical framework for engaging them within the life of the church. This work is grounded in the belief that transformation occurs not only through innovative ideas, but through new practices that reshape how communities live, relate, and imagine their future together.

I encounter this reality day after day. Congregations seek to sell another piece of property to extend the life of the church for a few more years. They look for a quick influx of cash, only to wonder why it does not sustain them. These decisions are often

rooted in a scarcity mindset shaped by systems of oppression, including whiteness, which have taught congregations to preserve rather than participate.[91]

What is operating in these moments is not simply financial decision-making, but a system shaped by scarcity, preservation, and inherited assumptions about institutional survival. These decisions function as mechanisms through which whiteness continues to shape how congregations interpret stewardship, prioritizing maintenance over participation in the broader work of the church.

Early in my work in Austin Texas, I was introduced to Teresa of Avila (1515–1582). A prayer commonly attributed to Teresa of Ávila declares, "Christ has no body but yours This poem radically changed how I think about serving all of God's people. [92]

> Christ Has No Body
> Teresa of Avila
>
> Christ has no body but yours,
> No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
> Yours are the eyes with which he looks
> Compassion on this world,
> Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good,
> Yours are the hands, with which he blesses all the world.
> Yours are the hands, yours are the feet,
> Yours are the eyes, you are his body.
> Christ has no body now but yours,
> No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
> Yours are the eyes with which he looks
> compassion on this world.
> Christ has no body now on earth but yours.

It is through this idea of embodiment that I work to meet everyone I encounter. The practical side of embodying Christ informs every interaction I have. I live this out by

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[91] Bonilla-Silva, Racism without Racists, 79.

[92] "Christ Has No Body," commonly attributed to Teresa of Ávila, Journey with Jesus, accessed 09,03,2025. https://www.journeywithjesus.net/poemsandprayers.

teaching others how to be the hands and feet of Christ. This is a sacred action of embodying the teachings of Jesus. This work runs counter to the current U.S. cultural narrative of the white macho Jesus.

In this way, embodiment is not merely a personal spiritual practice but a communal and institutional reality. When congregational systems privilege certain voices, norms, or identities, they shape who is able to fully participate in the life of the body. Theologically, this raises critical questions about whether the church's structures reflect the inclusive and expansive nature of the body of Christ or reinforce inherited limitations shaped by culture and power.

While theological traditions such as embodied Christology affirm the communal nature of discipleship, this project extends that insight by demonstrating how embodiment must also be understood structurally within congregational systems. The question is not only how individuals embody Christ, but how congregational practices either enable or restrict that embodiment through patterns of authority, participation, and belonging.

By stripping back the layers of one's own bias and prejudice, we begin to see the face of God in those we encounter. As an Executive Presbyter, I zoom the work out to take a wider view. I guide our pastors, committees, and congregations in how they too can be the hands and feet of Christ. This means being very intentional in my own language and practices around belonging and hospitality. In shifting our organizational vocabulary, toward an embodied understanding of abundance, we have begun to see renewed energy and excitement. Congregations that had disengaged in the work of being a connectional church are reengaging in the shared ministry of the presbytery.

This shift is reinforced through intentional changes in language and practice, reframing conversations from scarcity toward theological understandings of abundance. They hear about feeding God's sheep and being the hands and feet of Christ. More importantly they experience this in how I do my own work and how I live my own life. We name that the work of the church is hard and messy. We affirm this by naming that if we are all made in God's image then we know God is a little messy too and that is okay. We are called to love God and love our neighbor, feed God's flock, and make disciples. If it is not building up the kingdom of God we simply do not have time for it. I am now at the phase in my life and work where I am seeing the seeds of this very intentional work shift our organizational culture.

Recently at our Fiscal Operations meeting my presbytery treasurer was telling us about the work they were doing in his home church around how they are using their money. They are looking at their mission giving and asking if they are living into the call of God's people. This is a highly active congregation who has been without a pastor for quite a while and yet they are thriving. They realized that instead of a fully ordained and installed pastor a Commissioned Ruling Elder (Lay Pastor) was a better fit. When I asked him what facilitated this sudden deep dive into finances and discerning who they are as a community together. His reply honestly took me by surprise. He explained that because we keep talking about having enough and not building up storehouses he thought it was time to do that at the local church.

Since they undertook this self-exploration, they have doubled down on serving their community and are in the process of hiring a gifted Commissioned Ruling Elder. This Elder is a schoolteacher, who has done her 25 years of teaching with a passion for

service. She did not fit the traditional model laid out in the book of order but she is the right person to do the work. Four long years of trying to find a full-time minister with little success to being a church empowered to try something different. They heard the message that it was okay to try new things and to ask the tough questions. They are about to enter a wonderful new phase in ministry with a Commissioned Pastor.

My work is focused on helping congregations shift from these patterns of scarcity toward places of sustainability and abundance. This begins by identifying pockets of abundance that already exist and planting seeds for how those resources might be shared in ways that serve a broader community. It requires reimagining abundance not as something to protect, but as something to be put into motion. In this way, resources become a means of mission rather than a means of maintaining buildings and leadership models that no longer fit the church as we find her today.

The distinction between welcome and belonging is not merely relational but structural, as illustrated in Figure 3.

Figure 3. From welcome to belonging: Moving from surface inclusion to structural participation.

This movement requires disruption, reorientation of power, and a reimagining of participation within congregational life.

Naming the Project

This project proposes a practical theological framework for congregational engagement that moves communities from scarcity toward abundance through relational engagement, theological reframing, and adaptive practice.

This framework began to take shape much earlier in my career. My approach of putting people first protecting my teams, and building deep, meaningful connections often stood in tension with the Human Resources practices of the corporate environments in which I worked. While language around empathy and care was present, the underlying goal often remained productivity, serving more customers, increasing efficiency, and asking employees to set aside their own needs for the sake of output.

After leaving that world, attending seminary, and entering full-time ministry, I was surprised to discover similar patterns within the life of the church. Conversations in church conference rooms often mirrored corporate logic. People became giving units. Families, young people, and diversity were reduced to numbers on a page.

It was in this realization that my call began to deepen. Just as God had called me into ministry, I came to understand that I was also being called to bring my full lived experience into the work of reconnecting the people of God to the Body of Christ. This work draws on everything I have learned, navigating difficult conversations, leading with clarity, and choosing to act with love and kindness even in moments of frustration or conflict with the beloved child of God sitting across from me.

This is practical work. It is relational work. It requires being present with people, getting to know them, and walking alongside them as they learn to move through the world in ways that honor the Great Commandment.[93]

This framework is not a fixed program or curriculum. Flexibility is essential to this work. No two congregations are the same, and no single program can address every challenge. This approach is shaped by the understanding that the church must move away

[93] Matthew 22:36–40.

from inherited systems of oppression and toward spaces of healing and hope. We simply cannot continue to hoard valuable resources for rainy days that are constantly redefined repeatedly. This reflects a pattern in which congregations continually redefine conditions for action, delaying meaningful engagement with underlying issues. A fitting example of this was the cutting of salaries during the COVID 19 pandemic for pastors and staff instead of using rainy day funds for a global pandemic. Storing up wealth for a future we are not promised simply harms those the funds were designed to help.

Grounding this work in Luke 12 allows us to see clearly what must change. The issue is not a lack of resources; it is our relationship to them. Congregations already hold abundance. The work is to name it, to make it visible, and to invite communities into practices of generosity that reflect trust in God's provision.[94]

This includes naming whiteness, observing the surrounding community, and speaking truth about the harm caused by systems that have shaped the church's life. Between wound and resurrection, congregations are invited to find their voice, name what has been broken, imagine new possibilities, and move toward the promise of new life.

This framework is a process that can be adapted across contexts, shaped by the unique dynamics of each congregation and community. At its core, it is a way of engaging ministry that invites the church to reimagine how it understands and uses its resources; financial, relational, and physical; in service of God's ongoing work in the world.

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[94] Luke 12:15–21.

This work draws on insights from stewardship and adaptive leadership, including the recognition that many congregations are not lacking resources, but are constrained by how those resources are understood and used.[95] It also resonates with approaches that invite the church to "fish differently," not by abandoning tradition, but by rethinking how it engages the context in which it is called to serve.[96]

The framework guiding this project is summarized visually in Figure 4.

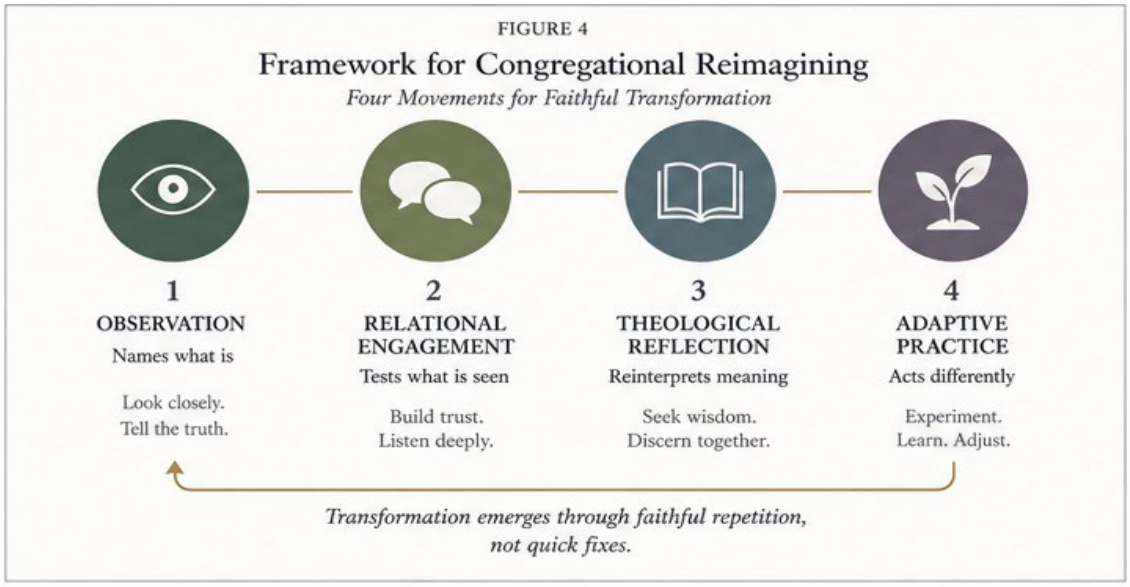

Figure 4. Framework for congregational reimagining: Four movements for faithful transformation

These movements function not as discrete steps, but as an ongoing rhythm that shapes congregational discernment and practice.

Core Problem

[95] Elsdon, We Aren't Broke, 107.

[96] Sidney Williams, teaching on "fishing differently," cited in ministry context.

The core problem this project addresses is not simply financial decline or institutional instability, but a theological and cultural formation that limits imagination. Both my observation and research show that modern-day church structures are no longer sustainable for many congregations across the mainline church. Long gone are the days of fully staffed ministry teams consisting of a pastor, associate, secretary, and program directors. While some congregations still maintain these structures, they too are facing the realities of sustaining them. Larger congregations must do even more work to address the systems of whiteness and ingrained patterns that continue to shape how ministry is organized and maintained.

When whiteness functions as an unexamined norm, it shapes how the church defines faithfulness, often reinforcing patterns of control, preservation, and exclusion.[97]

These patterns are particularly visible in how congregations engage resources. Buildings are treated as assets to be maintained rather than spaces for mission. Financial resources are preserved for institutional survival rather than deployed for community engagement. Leadership, which was once shared by many, becomes increasingly concentrated. Often maintaining a full-time pastor becomes the primary goal, even at the expense of broader mission and community engagement.

This often shows up in the expectations placed on pastoral leadership. Systems that were sustained by teams of people are now transferred onto a single individual. Pastors feel they need to always be all things to all people, while also maintaining a balanced family life and personal well-being. This is not sustainable, not for the pastor, and not for the congregation. Over time, both experience burnout.

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[97]Bonilla-Silva, Racism without Racists, 21.

At the same time, congregations begin to operate from a place of fear. The narrative shifts toward what we cannot afford. The building must be maintained, and the budget must be protected. The result is a narrowing of vision, where survival becomes the primary goal and imagination starts to erode.

This results in congregations that are resource-rich but mission-constrained.[98] More often, what is seen as scarcity reveals itself as a limitation in how resources are understood and engaged. Systems of privilege, shaped by whiteness, have limited the church's ability to see beyond preservation and toward participation in the work of the Kingdom of God.

This reality calls for more than minor adjustments. It requires naming what has been inherited, claiming responsibility for how it continues to shape the present, and committing to change. When systems were not built for the fullness of the body of Christ to begin with, it falls to us to reimagine them for those who come after.

This is, at its core, a matter of stewardship. We are entrusted with the life of the church for a season in time. The call is not to preserve systems that no longer serve the people of God, but to faithfully steward the church into the world as we find her today. This means being socially connected to the world around us so that we build the social capital needed to solve larger issues that individual giving cannot solve.[99]

I build social capital by being active in community organizations, state Council of Churches, the Poor Peoples Campaign, and other groups who are engaged in vast diversities of issues. I engage with communities who do not align politically or

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[98] Elsdon, We Aren't Broke. 42.

[99] Williams Fishing, 41.

religiously with my family or church community. I collaborate as closely with my pagan and atheist friends as I do with my inter faith and ecumenical friends. I seek out diversity and if an organization has none, I volunteer for the nominating committee and use this social capital to bring diversity into the room. I used the power that comes with privilege to say what others cannot safely say.

Simply put, I change systems by entering them and changing them from within. I do this on the local and national levels of church and culture. You do not need the loudest voice or the flashiest social media to change the culture. You do need social capital, credibility, and clear boundaries around your work and your family. Changing systems from within can be and often is dangerous. Death threats, threats of violence, and directed assaults on your character and ethics is commonplace. For pastors willing to engage fully the work of God in the world, speaking truth to power comes with consequences. For those of us born in bodies that allow us to enter places of privilege and power we must come to grips with these threats. They are what people of color, queer folks, and visibly disabled bodies experience every day in the world and heartbreakingly in the very church structures that should be places of belonging and support. This is what it looks like to be the hands and feet of Christ in the world.

We are called to live fully into the present moment, trusting that God continues to make all things new. If we have breath, we can participate in the work of God; to name what is broken, to imagine what is possible, and to move toward a more faithful expression of the body of Christ

Across these examples, a consistent pattern emerges: congregations are not lacking resources, but are constrained by how those resources are understood and

engaged. While the specific circumstances vary, the underlying mechanism remains the same: systems shaped by whiteness organize decision-making in ways that prioritize preservation, limit participation, and constrain imagination.

The Proposed Framework

This work reflects how I personally engage systems of whiteness and begin dismantling structures of power and influence from within the system. This is a practical approach to meeting people where they are. It is a way of thinking and guiding conversations that allows us to hold the complexity of human nature, especially the parts we often struggle to name or address.

This is not a quick or effortless process. It is deeply introspective, inviting both individuals and congregations to move from ground-level thinking to a broader view of how systems of power operate; how they both subjugate and, when reimagined, have the potential to liberate.[100]

This project proposes a framework for congregational engagement built around four movements identified in the methodological approach: observation, relational engagement, theological reflection, and adaptive practice. This framework emerges from the analysis of recurring patterns identified across multiple congregational contexts. It is not abstract or theoretical alone, but grounded in lived ministry experience interpreted through practical theological inquiry. In this way, the framework functions as both a theological argument and a practical method for engaging congregational life. I begin this

[100] Bonilla-Silva, Racism without Racists, 231.

work through engagement with community statistical reporting and sustained observation.

This framework does not simply respond to congregational decline, but reinterprets it theologically. Rather than treating these challenges as organizational failure, this project demonstrates that they are the result of inherited theological and cultural systems that shape how congregations understand leadership, belonging, and stewardship. The work of reimagining, therefore, is not primarily strategic but theological.

Observation

I begin not only by listening, but by observing those who are communicating. Who has a voice? Who is included in the conversations and who left out? Who is in the room, and how do they benefit from the conversation taking place? These observations reveal patterns of power, participation, and silence that often go unspoken.[101]

This includes looking at church dynamics and how those in power may be related by blood, marriage, or work. You cannot simply depend on who is in the room making decisions. Across clubs, organizations, and churches, there are always individuals who carry power and influence. This could be anyone from a large doner to the ladies of the church who make the ministry work happen behind the scenes. Observing and interrupting go hand in hand. We do that interpretation through building relationships and engaging as many people as possible.

Relational Engagement

[101]Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, 105.

Meeting people where they are is the foundation of this work. Relationships are built through presence, honesty, and clarity. I name how our relationship may change over time, identifying where my role as Executive Presbyter ends and where my role as pastor and companion in the work begins. Setting clear and honest boundaries allows people to understand my role from the beginning, creating a foundation for trust and shared work.

I participated in our village's ecumenical youth leadership conference. I knew that my theology is more expansive and inclusive than most congregations in our community and the youth that attend them. I was nervous and discussed this with the conference organizer who I have gotten to know through community theater and at the pie shop she helps run. She assured me that she creates intentional space with as vast a variety of voices as she can get in rural Minnesota.

I agreed to participate and I am so glad I did. The feedback was life giving. I allowed them to ask questions and not have a set agenda or tasks to do. This allowed the participants to simply ask what they were too afraid to ask their normal pastor. We met in a lodge in the common room on comfortable sofas and overstuffed chairs. After preaching I went home and changed out of my clericals and returned wearing my overhauls, boots, hat, and braids. I did this so that these young people would recognize me in the community not just when they see me on Sunday.

I met them where they were and took them into a deep conversation around Biblical Greek and Hebrew and how we interpret scripture. By the end of the second workshop, we were discussing the expansiveness of theology and what leadership looks like when you open your reading of text up to a broader understanding. My favorite part

was to hear youth and their parents say they had never had expansive reading of the bible explained. I had one mom thank me because she could never understand, why women were written out of the Bible. She admitted it had never occurred to her to ask if the Biblical languages were gendered language. She said she knows some Spanish so gendered language through that lens finally made sense to her. I met them where they were, showed up, built trust, and changed understanding.

Theological Reflection

Theological reflection is grounded in storytelling; engaging scripture in ways that allow communities to see the text alive in the world today. Each movement, especially when naming trauma and harm caused by systems of privilege and whiteness, must be rooted in the Gospel teachings of Jesus. Scripture becomes a living conversation partner, shaping how communities interpret their experiences and imagine new possibilities.[102]

Reflecting on scripture and how it guides our understanding of who we are as Jesus following Christians can be intimidating. Delving into the reasons a church does anything productive or self-destructive must be done in a way that invites us into conversation with the Holy Spirit. Sometimes this means knowing when to cause disruption and when to sit back and listen. When you can discern this, you can know which theological reflection will accomplish this work you need to accomplish.

Are we breaking barriers to a more inclusive space then I might choose the story of the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:26-40). Women in ministry, how about Deborah and her life as a judge for her community, (Judges 4 & 5). And as outlined earlier the Bible gives

[102] Copeland, Enfleshing Freedom, 93.

us a wealth of examples of serving God's people. This becomes the theological foundation to build your work upon depending on what the unique situation may be. That is why as practitioners of the church we must be well versed and educated around the expansiveness of theology. We must move from the white heteronormative male European theology to include a vast knowledge and working practice of all forms of theology. Not denying or discounting the great church thinkers that have left us a lasting and sturdy foundation, while also admitting that it is not the only way to read and interpret scripture.

By engaging in vast forms of theological studies, we may not become experts or even understand them all, but they will not be a foreign concept to us. Although we may not embody the same lived experiences as someone else it should never stop us from meaningful engagement with solid theological work. We may not be able to truly know what it is to live in a body different than our own, but at least we can try and listen, learn and affirm their lived experience and contribution to the conversations. In doing this hard and powerful work we are able to move our understanding and those around us to adapt to immerging systems and cultural shifts potentially holding them back from reforming and growing.

Adaptive Practice

An unfolding begins when people can see themselves within the gospel story. They begin to ask whether what they are currently doing reflects the work of Jesus in the

world. This process takes time and requires a commitment to walk humbly with God and alongside one another.[103]

This often leads to adaptation, in pastoral leadership, mission priorities, and the use of physical space. Change becomes organic rather than forced. Systems of power found in church and in society cannot be reformed if they are not first acknowledged and engaged with honestly. Recognition takes time and a lot of hard conversations as imagination begins to shift, so do the practices that shape congregational life.

When I arrived and started my work in John Knox Presbytery it was the practice that if a congregation wanted to sell or purchase property, they filled out a simple form and then it went to council. Encumbering the church was questioned but when it came to selling property it was a straightforward process. In my first six months we approved two sales and one purchase of a mission property by a congregation. I explained to the council why assets are so important as once they are sold, they are gone for good.

Rev. Elsdon, a member of our presbytery, is one of the main resources for congregations seeking to discern vitality and sustainability across the country. To my surprise he had never been asked to present his work at a presbytery meeting. When the National church started discussing his work and partnered with his company to offer free and discounted programs, then he was asked to present at a meeting. Before accepting this call, I had already spent five years studying Marks work and projects from a distance before entering this role.

[103]Micah 6:8.

I was a year into my DMin program with Rev. Dr. Sidney Williams when I accepted the call to John Knox Presbytery. Moving from doing this work on a single congregational level to a much larger frame of influence.

I was able to work with the Presbytery Council that act as our trustees for the purpose of selling or encumbering church property. We established a trustee's workgroup to start asking better questions prior to approving any property matters. I then used Dr Williams and Rev Elsdon's books to train them. I explained how I have implemented their work into mine over the years.

I use "We Aren't Broke" to ground my work in solid Presbyterian theology. In our unique situation I can show congregations what has been done in our own Presbytery. I then use "Fishing Differently" to give them a no-nonsense guide to how to do the work of getting to the root of the issues holding them back[104] Both practitioners work is at the forefront of reimagining what church can look like when we use our social capital to impact the life and mission of the church.

After training the trustees workgroup we had to retrain the presbytery leadership and Council how we would work going forward. We decided that prior to doing the paperwork or engaged realtors that congregations contact their church liaison and discuss their desired outcome. They then contact me and I engage the trustees to work with the church Sessions or property committee. We then help them explore different options

[104] Elsdon and Williams

especially around the sale of a property or asset. As Elsdon says in his most recent work that once an asset is gone, it is gone for good. [105]

Our main goal is to help the congregations ask better questions. To help them understand that a one-time influx of cash does not aid in sustainability because once sold there is no way of using it to help fund the ministry. An example of this is when a church sells its manse or parsonage because their pastor owns or rents a different home that selling the asset makes sense. But what happens when they need to hire a different pastor and discover that because housing cost have skyrocketed, they cannot afford a housing allowance. Suddenly that one time investment becomes a regret because now they cannot afford the very ministry model they sold the property to maintain.

The alternatives we discuss with them include renting the property, redeveloping it into apartments or affordable housing. Looking for community partners who may be willing to rent and maintain the property. Traveling nurses and adjunct professors need housing and a church can offer that cheaper than a month at an extended stay or executive housing. If the building is too expensive instead of selling, would they be interested in collaborating with a company like Dr. Williams or Rev. Elsdon.

We currently have one active project in development that is Presbyterian and at least two that are not. All within driving distance of any of our congregations. We have one that is in the initial stages of exploring adaptive reuse and partnerships. Doing this work has revealed that they may be better suited selling and moving to a smaller space or planning for a faithful legacy. What a wonderful legacy if they are able to work with a

[105] Mark Elsdon, Gone for Good? Negotiating the Coming Wave of Church Property Transition (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2021).

development group to sell the property while also preserving a 150-year-old sacred space for the community.

We will support and help any congregation through a sale. Our goal is to bring them into active conversation with the work of adaptive reuse and the reimagining of what sacred space and property can be. The trustees have embraced the work and have proven to be curious and interested in helping congregations of all sizes thrive in whatever form that may take.

These movements form a cyclical process that guides how congregations engage change. The work begins with observation, followed by relational engagement, theological reflection, and adaptive practice.

This framework intentionally moves from imagination to practice, recognizing that transformation takes root only when new ways of seeing are embodied in lived action.

This framework is not linear. It is iterative. Each movement informs the next, creating an ongoing process of discernment and adaptation. Transformation begins when we stop trying to fix things and instead allow imagination, guided by the Holy Spirit, to take root and grow. This shift begins not by adding something new, but by learning to see differently what has been present all along.

This work is both immediate and long-term. Planting seeds can happen quickly. Cultivating growth, however, requires time, care, and commitment. Congregations already desire to thrive. They want strong leadership, meaningful connection, and a sense of purpose. Yet they often find themselves constrained by inherited systems that limit that very work.

No congregation sets out to fail or to become confined by what it cannot do. This work begins to flourish when the practitioner is willing to enter the process with a sense of wonder, remaining open to how God is already at work in ways that may not be immediately visible. It is in this space; between intention and trust, that transformation begins to take root.

Key Practices

This framework is embodied through a set of core practices that shape how congregations engage their work:

Reframing Resources

Congregations are invited to shift from a mindset of scarcity toward one of abundance. Financial resources, buildings, and relationships are understood not as assets to be preserved, but as gifts to be shared in service of the broader community.[106]

This often begins with taking a hard look at the books and engaging in faith-filled conversations about why resources exist and what their intended purpose has been. Congregations are invited to move from scarcity-driven practices toward a more faithful engagement with what is already present. This requires naming the difference between hoarding resources out of fear and stewarding them in ways that reflect trust in God's provision.

Relational Engagement

[106] Elsdon, We Aren't Broke.

Change begins with relationships. This includes creating space for honest conversation, listening across differences, and building trust both within the congregation and with the surrounding community.

In my work within the presbytery, I often seek out Elders who already have a connection to the congregation. Because I am still relatively new to the Midwest, bringing in someone from within the system who is known and trusted helps establish relational credibility. This also allows space for reframing narratives that have become deeply ingrained in the identity of the congregation. Stories that once limited imagination can begin to shift when heard through a different relational lens.

Theological Storytelling

Scripture is used not simply for instruction, but for imagination. Stories such as Luke 12 and the feeding of the five thousand are engaged as lenses through which congregations can reimagine how they understand resources, responsibility, and participation.[107]

This is often the most challenging part of the work. Theological storytelling invites congregations to examine the narratives they hold about themselves. Do they see themselves as victims of decline, or as participants in God's ongoing work? Where do their stories align with systems of empire, and how have those systems shaped their identity?

Through this process, congregations are invited into a more expansive theological imagination; one that moves beyond serving only those within their walls and toward

[107] Copeland, Enfleshing Freedom, 111.

engaging the broader community. Those who are able to engage this work begin to reframe what they do have from a place of abundance, asking how they might faithfully serve God's people with what is already present.

Shared Leadership

Authority is expanded beyond traditional structures. Leadership becomes participatory, creating space for voices that have historically been marginalized within the life of the church.

Shared leadership is deeply rooted in the Reformed tradition. Ruling Elders, Teaching Elders, and Deacons are called into distinct roles, yet all are part of the shared ministry of the church. Leadership is not hierarchical in value but differentiated in function.[108]

As congregations begin to reclaim this understanding, new possibilities emerge. Authority can be redistributed, and leadership can be shared in creative ways. This may look like Session members taking turns preaching, or congregations reimagining pastoral roles by sharing responsibilities across a broader leadership base.

At the same time, not all congregations are willing to engage this work. Some remain committed to maintaining existing structures, even when those structures are no longer sustainable. In these cases, congregations may find themselves slowly declining, holding onto buildings and systems primarily for the sake of continuity.

[108] Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Book of Order.

This is often the most difficult reality to name. Yet even here, the possibility for change remains. With imagination and willingness, adaptive leadership and creative restructuring can open pathways toward renewed life, meaning, and purpose.

Adaptive Use of Space

Physical spaces are reimagined as sites of ministry rather than symbols of institutional identity. This includes exploring adaptive reuse and new forms of community engagement that reflect the realities of the surrounding context.

In my own work, we are currently undertaking our second adaptive reuse project, with several more in development. We have formed a trustees' workgroup that I have trained to engage in this work. Members of this group have participated in multiple projects and are becoming well-versed in approaches such as "Fishing Differently" and Rooted Good.[109]

This work represents a shift away from simply approving property sales for the sake of short-term financial gain. Instead, we walk alongside congregations through a process of discernment, helping them identify new ways of being church and engaging in the abundance already present within their context.

Through this work, buildings move from being burdens to being opportunities; spaces where new forms of ministry, connection, and community life can take shape.

Intended Outcomes

The intended outcome of this project is not simply organizational change, but a transformation of imagination that leads to new forms of practice. I have seen this begin

[109] Sidney Williams, teaching on "Fishing Differently," ministry context; RootedGood initiative.

to take shape through shared ministries, a successful church merger, and a wide range of congregational experiences in between. These are not isolated successes, but indicators of what becomes possible when imagination begins to shift.

Congregations engaged in this work begin to reimagine their relationship to resources, expand participation in leadership and decision-making, engage their communities in new and meaningful ways, and move from preservation toward participation in God's ongoing work.

This work is deeply relational and deeply personal. It requires naming hard truths and walking alongside those who are willing to engage them. This has become central to my ministry; accompanying congregations as they navigate the tension between what has been and what is emerging.

This transformation is not immediate. It unfolds over time through sustained engagement, reflection, and practice. However, when it begins to take root, it reshapes how congregations understand both their identity and their calling within the world.

This work is not about saving the church as it has been. It is about naming the systems that have limited the church's ability to live fully into its calling. Systems shaped by whiteness were not created by those currently inhabiting them, but they continue to shape how the church operates and imagines itself.[110]

The work before us is to reform these systems so they more faithfully reflect the expansive vision of the body of Christ. This includes creating spaces where all voices are

[110] Bonilla-Silva, Racism without Racists, 108.

heard, where participation replaces exclusion, and where belonging moves beyond surface-level welcome.[111]

As this shift takes hold, congregations begin to relate to their resources, leadership, and identity in ways that reflect a broader vision of what is possible.

The following section will demonstrate how this framework takes shape within specific congregational contexts, offering concrete examples of how these practices are enacted in real ministry settings.

[111] Copeland, Enfleshing Freedom, 111.

CHAPTER FIVE

IMPLEMENTATION AND CASE STUDY

The framework outlined in the previous section is not theoretical.[112] It has been developed and refined through lived ministry experience and is actively being implemented within multiple congregational contexts.[113] This section demonstrates how the framework takes shape in practice, highlighting how observation, relational engagement, theological reflection, and adaptive practice function across different ministry settings.[114]

These cases do more than illustrate application; they function as sites of practical theological analysis. Each example demonstrates how recurring patterns identified in this study are enacted within congregational life and how they may be interrupted through intentional engagement. In this way, the cases extend the theoretical claims of this project by demonstrating their theological and practical implications in real time.

These patterns have been observed across multiple congregations, states, and contexts, regardless of size or location.[115] These dynamics do not exist in isolation; they are present both within and beyond the church, shaping how communities understand leadership, belonging, and stewardship.[116]

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[112] Developed through the author's lived ministry experience across multiple congregational contexts, 2018–2025.

[113] Author's field implementation across congregations in Alabama, Tennessee, Texas, Oklahoma, and the John Knox Presbytery region.

[114] Methodological approach based on ongoing pastoral observation, relational engagement, and adaptive ministry leadership across multiple congregational systems, 2020–2025.

[115] Author's field observation across multiple congregations, John Knox Presbytery and prior ministry contexts, 2020–2025.

[116] Author's field observation in congregational and community engagement contexts, 2020–2025.

What emerges across these contexts is a consistency in how these dynamics take shape, even as each congregation remains distinct.[117]

These examples are not presented as isolated success stories, but as patterns that emerge across contexts. Each congregation carries its own history, challenges, and possibilities. What remains consistent is the process; the willingness to observe honestly, engage relationally, reflect theologically, and adapt faithfully over time.

Context

This work takes place across a range of congregational settings shaped by varying sizes, resources, and histories. In my current role, I work alongside fifty-seven congregations across multiple states, allowing me to observe both local realities and broader system-wide patterns.[118]

What is often presented as a practical challenge is frequently rooted in deeper questions of identity, fear, belonging, and communal self-understanding.[119]

The following examples represent common types of congregational contexts encountered in this work.[120] One context includes congregations facing financial pressure and considering the sale of property as a primary strategy for survival. A second context includes congregations experiencing leadership strain and burnout, often relying heavily on a single pastor to sustain systems previously supported by broader leadership. A third

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[117]Author's comparative observation across multiple congregational systems, 2020–2025.

[118]Devon M. Reynolds, ministry context and presbytery leadership experience.

[119] Author's field observation in congregational identity, belonging, and decision-making patterns, 2020–2025.

[120] Author's synthesis of recurring congregational case patterns across multiple ministry contexts, 2020–2025.

context includes congregations holding significant physical assets while remaining uncertain how to engage them meaningfully within the surrounding community.

While distinct, these contexts share common underlying dynamics; constrained imagination, inherited systems, and uncertainty about how to move forward faithfully.

Across these contexts, a consistent pattern emerges: what appears as distinct challenges is often rooted in the same underlying dynamics. Systems shaped by whiteness constrain how congregations interpret leadership, belonging, and resources, reinforcing patterns of fear, preservation, and limited imagination.

The following cases are not presented as singular, isolated examples, but as representative patterns observed across multiple congregations. They emerge from repeated engagement in varied contexts and reflect how this framework consistently takes shape in practice. While each congregation is unique, the recurrence of these patterns suggests that this work is not bound to a single setting but is adaptable across the life of the church.

The dynamics explored throughout this study can be understood as a self-reinforcing system, as illustrated in Figure 5.

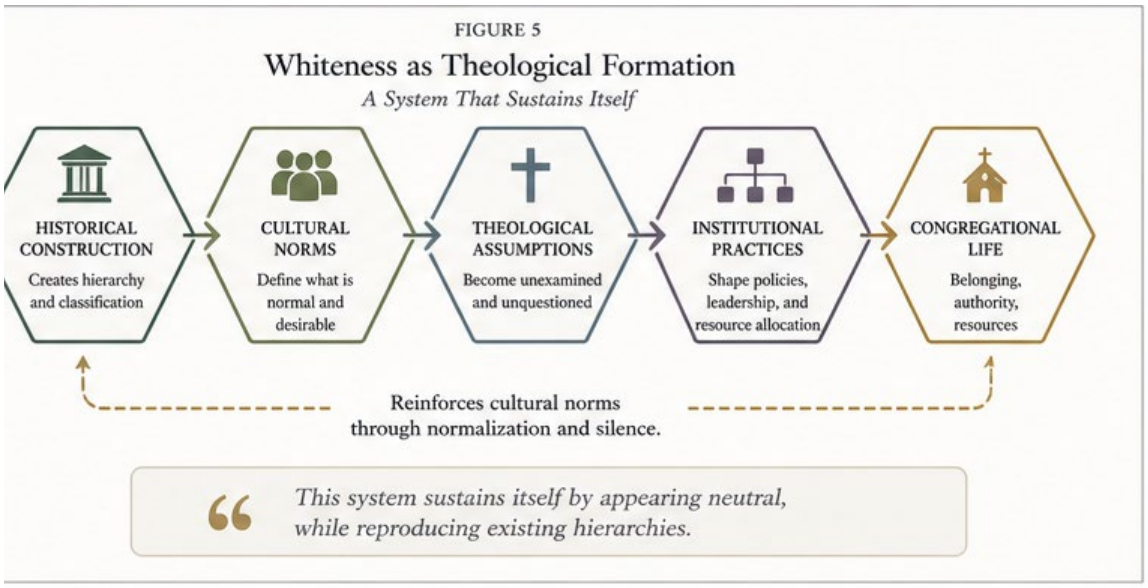

Figure 5. Whiteness as theological formation: A self-reinforcing system shaping congregational life.

This system sustains itself through normalization, appearing neutral while reproducing existing hierarchies within congregational life.

Application of the Framework

Case Study 1: Property and Scarcity Narrative

Observation

From early in the process, it became clear that something deeper was driving the conversation; something beyond discernment. It was clear early on that the conversation was being driven more by fear than by faithful reflection.[121]

Initial conversations centered on financial decline and the perceived need to sell property. The dominant narrative reflected scarcity; focusing on what could not be

[121] Author's field observation in congregational discernment processes and crisis-driven decision-making, 2020–2025.

sustained rather than what was already present. Decision-making was driven by urgency and fear.[122]

What is operating in this moment is a system shaped by scarcity and institutional preservation, where fear functions as a theological lens through which resources are interpreted. This reflects how whiteness continues to structure decision-making by normalizing preservation over participation in God's ongoing work.

What initially appeared as a financial concern began to reveal itself as a deeper question of how the congregation understood what it already had.[123]

Relational Engagement

Rather than introducing immediate solutions, the work began by building trust.[124] This included listening to the history of the congregation and engaging leaders in honest conversation. Bringing in individuals who were already trusted within the system helped shift the tone and allowed deeper concerns to surface.

Theological Reflection

This is often the moment where imagination begins to shift and transformation slowly starts to unfold.

Scripture, particularly Luke 12, was introduced as a way of reframing the congregation's relationship to resources.[125] The conversation shifted from survival

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[122] 2. Author's field observation in congregational financial narratives and scarcity framing, 2020–2025.

[123] Elsdon, We Aren't Broke, 42.

[124] Author's field observation in relational leadership and trust-building within congregational systems, 2020–2025.

[125] Luke 12:15–21 (NRSVUE).

toward stewardship; from "What must we sell?" to "What has God already provided, and how might it be shared?"[126]

Adaptive Practice

Rather than selling property, the congregation began exploring alternative uses of their space. Partnerships and shared use emerged, creating new opportunities for engagement with the surrounding community.[127]

This case demonstrates how reframing theological imagination around abundance can interrupt scarcity-driven decision-making and open new possibilities for mission and shared use of resources.[128]

Case Study 2: Leadership and Burnout

Observation

A single pastor was carrying responsibilities that had once been shared across multiple leaders. Expectations were high, and signs of burnout were evident. Leadership structures had become concentrated, and participation was limited.[129]

What remained unspoken was the deeper theological tension around sustainability and shared responsibility. We proclaim that following Jesus lightens our burdens, yet those burdens are only made lighter when they are carried together. Jesus sent disciples

[126] Luke 12:15–21.

[127] Author's field observation in adaptive reuse of congregational property and community engagement, 2020–2025.

[128] Copeland, Enfleshing Freedom, 111.

[129] Author's field observation in congregational leadership structures, burnout patterns, and role consolidation across multiple ministry contexts, 2020–2025.

out two by two; never alone.[130] Yet in practice, we often expect pastors or leaders to carry what was never meant to be carried individually. These are the conversations that go unnamed, fester over time, and ultimately cause harm.[131]

What was being experienced as personal strain was deeply connected to how leadership had been structured and sustained over time.[132]

This extends beyond a practical concern of workload into a theological question of embodiment and community. When leadership is concentrated in a single individual, the church functions in a way that contradicts its own theological claims about shared ministry. In this way, burnout is not simply a personal issue, but a structural and theological failure.

Relational Engagement

Conversations began by naming the realities of exhaustion and imbalance.[133] Space was created for both the pastor and congregational leaders to speak honestly about their experiences. Trust was built through consistent presence and clear communication.

Theological Reflection

[130] Mark 6:7 (NRSVUE).

[131] Mark 6:7; Luke 10:1.

[132] Edwin H. Friedman, A Failure of Nerve, Chapter 5.

[133] Author's field observation in facilitated leadership conversations and organizational reflection processes, 2020–2025.

The work returned to the Reformed understanding of shared leadership. Scripture and tradition were used to reframe leadership not as individual responsibility, but as collective participation in the work of the church.[134]

Adaptive Practice

Leadership began to expand.[135] Responsibilities were redistributed, and new leaders were invited into roles of participation. This included exploring creative approaches to preaching, care, and governance that reduced pressure on a single individual while strengthening the community.

As understanding deepened around the shared call of Teaching Elders, Ruling Elders, and Deacons, the burden began to lift. The pastor was no longer expected to be the church. Instead, the church began to recognize itself as a shared body, where each member carries part of the work. When those gifts are shared, the burden becomes lighter and the journey more faithful.[136]

This case demonstrates how redistributing leadership through a theological reframing of shared call can disrupt unsustainable systems and restore participation across the life of the congregation.

Case Study 3: Adaptive Use of Space

Observation

[134]Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Book of Order.

[135] Author's field observation in leadership development and participation expansion within congregations, 2020–2025.

[136] 1 Corinthians 12:12–27.

While working with this congregation, the presenting concern was not immediate financial collapse, but a growing uncertainty about the future. The congregation held significant physical assets, yet there was little clarity about how those resources connected to the life of the community beyond its walls. It was not a lack of resources, but a failure to recognize the abundance already present.[137]

What stood out immediately was the language being used. The building was described with reverence and care, while also being held in tension with grief over what once was. It was seen as something to be preserved at all costs, rather than as a resource for ministry. The focus remained inward; centered on sustaining the past rather than engaging the present.[138]

What is revealed in this context is a system in which material resources are symbolically tied to identity and memory, making change difficult. This reflects how whiteness shapes not only decision-making, but the emotional and theological meaning attached to space, reinforcing preservation over adaptive engagement.

Relational Engagement

The work began by building relationships with congregational leadership and forming a trustees' workgroup to engage the process together.[139] Rather than approaching the situation as a problem to be solved, I entered as a partner in discernment; listening to

[137]Elsdon, We Aren't Broke, 82.

[138] Author's field observation in inward-focused congregational systems and institutional preservation patterns, 2020–2025.

[139] Author's field observation in relational engagement and collaborative discernment processes, 2020–2025.

the history of the congregation, the meaning attached to the building, and the concerns shaping current decisions.

Trust began to grow as the process slowed and people felt seen and heard. As conversations deepened, it became possible to name both the attachment to the building and the fear of losing it. The work shifted from preservation to exploration.

Theological Reflection

Theological reflection centered on reframing how the congregation understood its space. Scripture expanded imagination, inviting the congregation to consider how what they had been given might serve the broader community.[140]

Rather than asking, "How do we keep this building?" the question became, "How might this space participate in God's work beyond our current use of it?" This marked a turning point. The building began to be seen not as an endpoint, but as a starting place for ministry. As the conversation shifted, what had once been framed as limitation began to open into new possibilities for engagement.[141] This is where theology moves from concept into lived, embodied reality.

Adaptive Practice

[140] Psalm 24:1 (NRSVUE).

[141] Luke 12:15–21.

From this shift, new possibilities began to emerge.[142] The congregation entered into a process of exploring adaptive reuse; identifying partnerships, community needs, and creative ways to engage their space.

This work required time, patience, and a willingness to remain open to what had not yet been imagined. Through the formation of a trained trustees' workgroup and the use of frameworks such as "Fishing Differently" and RootedGood, congregations began moving beyond short-term solutions toward long-term, mission-centered engagement.[143]

This is the work I am now witnessing take root across multiple congregations, organizations, and institutions. What once appeared as burden is being reimagined as opportunity; space becoming connection, and buildings becoming sites of renewed ministry and purpose.

Outcomes in Practice

Through these contexts, several consistent shifts began to emerge.[144] These changes were not immediate but became visible over time.

Language began to change. Conversations once shaped by scarcity and survival began to reflect curiosity, possibility, and shared mission.

Leadership expanded. Individuals who had not previously seen themselves as leaders began to participate more fully. Authority became more distributed, and decision-making more collaborative.

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[142] Author's field observation in adaptive reuse processes and congregational innovation, 2020–2025.

[143]Sidney Williams, teaching on "Fishing Differently," ministry context

[144] Author's comparative field observation across multiple congregational contexts, 2020–2025.

Resources were reimagined. Buildings, finances, and relationships were increasingly viewed as tools for ministry rather than assets to be preserved.

Most significantly, imagination began to shift. Congregations no longer defined themselves solely by decline, but by their capacity to participate in God's ongoing work.

This is where I see the Spirit at work; not in quick solutions, but in slow, faithful transformation.[145]

Reflection on the Process

Across these cases, several patterns became clear.

Resistance often emerged when long-held assumptions were named.[146] Systems that had been normalized over time were difficult to see, and even more difficult to change. Naming whiteness and its impact required patience, trust, and careful engagement.[147]

In many cases, the challenge is not the absence of resources, but a reluctance to engage them differently. At the same time, this discomfort often marked the beginning of transformation. When congregations were willing to remain present in that space, new possibilities began to emerge.

Not every worshipping community chooses this path. Those who do begin to experience new and faithful ways of being church together.

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[145] Galatians 5:22–23.

[146] Author's field observation in congregational resistance and system disruption during change processes, 2020–2025.

[147] Bonilla-Silva, Racism without Racists, 231.

A consistent lesson across contexts is the importance of pace. Change cannot be forced; it must be cultivated. This requires sustained presence, relational trust, and a willingness to allow the work to unfold over time.[148]

This work is deeply relational. Frameworks provide structure, but transformation occurs through relationships; through shared experience, honest conversation, and ongoing engagement.

Ongoing Implementation

This framework continues to be implemented across multiple congregations and contexts.[149] Each setting offers new insight into how the process unfolds and where further adaptation is needed.

These cases demonstrate that the framework is adaptable across a range of contexts. What remains consistent is the process; observation, relational engagement, theological reflection, and adaptive practice.

This has become a central part of how I understand my call within the life of the church and the ever-changing world we inhabit.

This work is ongoing. It does not conclude with a single outcome, but becomes a way of engaging ministry over time. As congregations continue to engage this process, they begin to move beyond maintaining what has been toward engaging what is emerging within their communities. The question is no longer whether change is possible, but whether we are willing to undertake the work required to make it real.

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[148] Richard Osmer, Practical Theology: An Introduction.

[149] Author's ongoing implementation of framework across multiple congregational systems, 2020–2025.

This case demonstrates how reimagining physical space through theological reflection and relational engagement can transform buildings from sites of preservation into active participants in God's work within the community.[150]

These cases demonstrate that the challenges facing congregations are not primarily logistical, but theological. When these systems are named and engaged, new possibilities for participation, leadership, and mission emerge. This confirms the central claim of this project: that transformation occurs not through external intervention, but through the reimagining of how congregations understand and embody their life together.

[150] Elsdon, We Aren't Broke, 162.

CHAPTER SIX

This project begins from the conviction that the crisis facing the church is not primarily institutional decline, but a deeper theological and cultural formation shaped by whiteness. This formation constrains imagination and shapes how congregations understand resources, leadership, and belonging.

While existing scholarship has identified the role of race and culture in shaping institutional life, this project extends that work by demonstrating how these dynamics function as theological formations within congregational systems. In this way, whiteness is not only a social reality but a theological one, shaping how the church interprets authority, belonging, and faithfulness. This requires not only recognition but disruption, as congregations must examine how these inherited systems continue to shape their decisions, practices, and imagination.

Through the lens of Luke 12:15–21, this work examines how "storehouses" function within congregational life; not only as physical realities, but as theological systems that shape how resources, power, and participation are ordered. Transformation begins as congregations learn to see differently, engaging practices of observation,

relational engagement, theological reflection, and adaptive action that move the church from preservation toward participation in God's ongoing work.[151]

Whiteness, as explored in this project, is not merely a social reality but a theological formation. It operates by establishing norms that are rarely named and even less frequently challenged. It shapes imagination, defining what is possible and what is not. Over time, these patterns begin to narrow how congregations understand themselves, their resources, and their role in the world. It determines whose voices are heard, whose leadership is trusted, and whose presence is centered within the life of the church.[152]

This formation does not remain confined to race alone. It extends into every system the church inhabits; leadership structures, financial practices, property use, and patterns of belonging. It teaches congregations to equate faithfulness with stability, to equate stewardship with preservation, and to equate success with control. In doing so, it narrows the church's ability to respond to the movement of the Spirit.

What has been demonstrated through this project is that these systems are not neutral. They are inherited, reinforced, and often left unexamined. Yet they are not immutable. They can be named, engaged, and transformed.

The framework developed in this work, grounded in observation, relational engagement, theological reflection, and adaptive practice, offers one way of engaging this transformation. It does not provide a quick solution. Instead, it creates space for congregations to see more clearly, to listen more deeply, and to respond more faithfully.

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[151] Luke 12:15–21.

[152] Bonilla-Silva, Racism without Racists, 231.

Through the case studies presented, it becomes evident that transformation begins not with structural overhaul, but with shifts in imagination. When congregations begin to see their resources differently, to share leadership more broadly, and to engage their communities more openly, new forms of ministry emerge. These are not departures from the gospel, but deeper expressions of it.

This work also makes clear that transformation is not without cost. Naming whiteness and confronting systems of power requires discomfort, patience, and sustained engagement. It requires the church to acknowledge the ways it has participated in systems that limit the fullness of the body of Christ. This is not a work of condemnation, but of confession.

Yet Christian theology does not end in confession. It moves toward resurrection.

The resurrection does not erase the wounds of the cross; it reveals them transformed. In the same way, the church does not move forward by forgetting its past, but by engaging it truthfully. The wounds carried within our systems, the exclusions, the inequities, the silences, must be named in order for healing to take place.[153]

This is the space between wound and resurrection.

It is here that the church is invited to rediscover its identity, not as an institution to be preserved, but as a body called into participation in God's ongoing work. It is here that stewardship is reframed, not as the protection of resources, but as their faithful sharing. It is here that leadership is reimagined, not as control, but as shared responsibility rooted in the gifts of the whole community.

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[153]John 20:24–29.

The implications of this work extend beyond any single congregation. They speak to the broader future of the church. As context continues to shift, the question is not whether the church has enough resources to survive, but whether it is willing to reimagine how those resources are understood and used.

Congregations that engage this work begin to move differently. They become more open, more relational, and more responsive to the communities around them. They begin to reflect a broader vision of the body of Christ; one that is not limited by inherited systems but expanded through faithful participation.

This is not fast work. It is slow, relational, and often uncertain. Yet it is in this slow work that transformation takes root.

I have witnessed this shift across multiple congregations and contexts. I have seen what happens when imagination begins to change; when fear gives way to curiosity, when control gives way to shared leadership, and when preservation gives way to participation. These moments do not signal the end of struggle, but they do reveal the possibility of new life.

This project has argued that the crisis facing the church is not simply one of decline, but one of formation; a formation shaped by whiteness that has constrained the church's imagination and limited how it understands resources, leadership, and belonging. What has been demonstrated is that when this formation is named and engaged, and when congregations begin to see differently, new possibilities begin to emerge through lived practices of observation, relational engagement, theological reflection, and adaptive action.

This project does not offer a definitive answer; it offers a way forward.

The church stands at a threshold. The systems that have shaped it are no longer sufficient for the world it inhabits. Yet within those same systems lies the possibility of transformation.

The question before us is not whether change is possible.

The question is whether we are willing to do the work required to reimagine what it means to be the church in the world as it is now. The work is already before us. What remains is whether we will choose to engage it.

Beyond its central argument, this work also makes a contribution to the field of practical theology.

This project contributes to the field of practical theology by offering both a theological diagnosis and a ministry-grounded framework for engaging the contemporary challenges facing the church. By naming whiteness as a theological formation that shapes congregational imagination, leadership, and stewardship, this work expands the conversation beyond institutional decline and into the deeper cultural and theological systems organizing church life. It demonstrates how qualitative, praxis-based research can surface patterns that are often unseen yet deeply influential in shaping communal identity and decision-making.

For church leaders, this project offers a practical and adaptable framework for engaging these realities within their own contexts. The cyclical process of observation, relational engagement, theological reflection, and adaptive practice provides a way to move beyond surface-level solutions toward deeper transformation. Rather than prescribing a single model, this work equips leaders to recognize patterns within their own congregations, ask more faithful questions, and respond in ways that are

contextually grounded and theologically informed. In this way, the project serves as both a resource for reflection and a guide for action, inviting congregations to move from preservation toward participation in God's ongoing work in the world.

Taken together, the work of naming, engaging, and reimagining becomes not only a scholarly contribution, but a faithful act of participation in God's ongoing work of renewal in the life of the church.

This project demonstrates that when congregations name and engage the systems shaping their life, they are able to move from preservation toward participation in God's work, reimagining leadership, stewardship, and belonging in ways that more fully reflect the body of Christ.

Between wound and resurrection, the church is invited to become more fully what it has always been called to be, and to participate more faithfully in the work God is already bringing to life.

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Appendix A

Reimagining Congregational Life: A Practical Framework

This framework emerges from sustained lived ministry experience interpreted through theological reflection and engagement with scholarship. It is designed not as a programmatic solution, but as a tool for identifying and engaging the underlying systems shaping congregational life.

Purpose

This framework is designed to help congregations engage systems of power, reimagine their relationship to resources, and move toward more faithful participation in God's work in the world. This is not a program to implement, but a process to enter.

The Four Movements

1. Observation — Seeing Clearly

   This phase invites leaders to identify patterns within congregational life that reveal underlying systems of belonging, authority, and resource allocation. These observations function as data, making visible the often-unseen dynamics shaping the life of the church.

Before anything changes, congregations must learn to see clearly.

Attention is given to who is present and who is absent, whose voices are heard and whose are not, how decisions are made, and how resources are currently being used. This step requires honesty rather than judgment, creating space for deeper awareness of existing patterns.

2. Relational Engagement — Listening Deeply

Through relational engagement, these patterns are tested and clarified within community, allowing implicit assumptions and systems of power to surface through conversation and shared experience.

Transformation begins with trust.

This includes listening without the need to immediately solve problems

Appendix B

Resources for Identifying and Engaging Systems of Whiteness in Congregational Life

The following resources are offered to support congregational leaders in identifying, interpreting, and engaging the systems described in this project. These materials are not intended as a checklist or curriculum, but as tools for theological reflection, communal discernment, and adaptive practice. They are most effective when used in conjunction with the framework of observation, relational engagement, theological reflection, and adaptive practice outlined in this study.

Understanding Whiteness as a System

These resources support the identification of racialized systems that operate through normalized expectations, often appearing neutral while reinforcing existing hierarchies.

Bonilla-Silva, Eduardo. Racism without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America.

This work provides a sociological framework for identifying how racial systems operate through seemingly neutral assumptions that maintain structural inequality. It supports the interpretation of patterns observed in congregational life.

Kendi, Ibram X. Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America.

This text offers historical insight into the development of racist ideas and their ongoing influence. It supports congregational reflection on how inherited narratives continue to shape present realities.

Theological Imagination and Formation

These works provide theological grounding for understanding how Christian imagination has been shaped by cultural and racial formation, informing how congregations interpret belonging, authority, and faithfulness.

Jennings, Willie James. The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race.

Jennings demonstrates how Christian theology has been shaped by colonial and racialized frameworks. This work supports theological reflection on how congregational imagination has been formed and how it might be reimagined.

Cone, James H. A Black Theology of Liberation.

Cone centers the experience of marginalized communities as a source of theological knowledge. This work supports reflection on how theology must engage lived experience and systems of oppression.

Embodiment, Belonging, and Lived Experience

These resources center lived experience and embodiment, offering insight into how belonging is enacted structurally and how bodies are interpreted within theological space.

Copeland, M. Shawn. Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being.

Copeland emphasizes the role of embodiment in theological understanding. This work supports reflection on how bodies are read within congregational life and how belonging is experienced in practice.

Kenny, Amy. My Body Is Not a Prayer Request: Disability Justice in the Church.

Kenny highlights how ableism and assumptions about normalcy shape church life. This work supports examination of how inclusion and belonging are experienced by those whose bodies fall outside dominant expectations.

Congregational Leadership and Adaptive Change

These materials support leaders in navigating institutional change, particularly in contexts marked by uncertainty, decline, and adaptive challenge.

Elsdon, Mark. We Aren't Broke: Uncovering Hidden Resources for Mission and Ministry.

Elsdon challenges scarcity-based thinking and highlights the abundance already present within congregations. This work supports reimagining stewardship and resource use.

Elsdon, Mark. Gone for Good? Negotiating the Coming Wave of Church Property Transition.

This work addresses the realities of property, decline, and transition within congregational life. It supports leaders navigating difficult decisions around buildings and assets.

Beaumont, Susan. How to Lead When You Don't Know Where You're Going.

Beaumont offers guidance for leading in uncertain and liminal seasons. This work supports leaders navigating ambiguity and institutional change.

Heifetz, Ronald A. Leadership Without Easy Answers.

Heifetz provides a framework for adaptive leadership. This work supports leaders in distinguishing between technical problems and adaptive challenges within congregational systems.

Guiding Questions for Congregational Reflection

The following questions are offered as starting points for congregations seeking to engage the systems described in this project:

What patterns of belonging and exclusion are visible within our congregation?

Who is able to participate fully in leadership, decision-making, and worship?

What assumptions about authority and legitimacy shape our decisions?

How are our resources being used, and what theological assumptions guide those choices?

Where do we see evidence of abundance, and where do we default to scarcity?

How might our practices reflect inherited cultural norms rather than intentional theological commitments?