

A PASTORAL THEOLOGY OF TRUST
Forging Deep-Shift Changes in Culture and Practice
in Parish, Regional, and Judicatory Communities of Faith

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Abstract:

This thesis delves into the powerful intersection of social theories of legitimation and validation with a well-structured pastoral theology of trust. Our aim is to propose a dynamic framework that inspires missional and cultural renewal within faith communities. We underscore that grasping the social science theories of legitimation—how authority is recognized and embraced—and validation—how roles and relationships are affirmed—is vital for nurturing a strong and coherent community identity. By embedding these social theories within a pastoral theology centered on trust, we highlight the necessity of fostering genuine connections and open dialogue among congregational members and leaders. This theological lens prompts us to reflect on the significance of trust in our collective faith journey, encouraging individuals to share their stories with confidence and contribute meaningfully to our shared mission. As faith communities navigate periods of change and evolving dynamics, the insights drawn from legitimation and validation offer a powerful framework for resolving conflicts and strengthening community bonds. Embracing these concepts enables us to refresh our missional identity and cultural practices, facilitating adaptive growth and meaningful transformation both locally and in wider social and ecclesial networks. In essence, this synthesis provides an encouraging pathway for faith communities to confidently embrace their evolving narratives while remaining rooted in trust, purpose, and shared values.

Dedication and Acknowledgments

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The Question:

Throughout my experience in congregational development, transition ministry, and pastoral tenure, I have found that leading groups of people through community transitions and change is the most challenging. Changes in the surrounding community generate stress as expectations within a faith community transform over time. Changes in roles for groups and individuals in the community can generate conflict between members, between leaders and members, and between leaders at every level of a Church's local and judicatory bodies.

To sustain and foster healthy changes in culture, role expectations, and practice, we identify and create practical ways for local and judicatory leadership to observe and manage transformational growth, and to work with the community's shifting culture to guide groups toward healthy, relationship-focused outcomes. The initial focus will be on forging consensus on notable, achievable goals for shared work. Supporting that consensus, leadership will forge processes that align with the community's current missional identity as it discerns further, adaptive practices and relationships. Practice will support a cycle of cultural and practical alignment among structure, practice, and support to meet the needs of the parish and the wider community beyond its membership.

Once consensus on that narrative is secured, the group will form and then redevelop a validated method for a renewed ministry covenant or a strategic mission plan for near-term projects. That plan will not be so much a deliverable document; we might construe it as a charter that releases the group to a continuing cycle of review and reassessment,

along with a developed skill at being able to reset expectations in the face of perceived and accepted goals, forms, and structures that affirm legitimation of the leadership and affirmation of the validation of consensus.

These goals focus on providing consistent, favorable resolutions to conflict-centered issues and on supporting articulated leadership styles. Both outcomes address fundamental questions about missional identity and how individual leaders and groups achieve legitimate, objective, and coherent relationships with their constituents. They will also assist those groups in building the theological and structural consensus needed to recognize and sustain coherent, sustainable outcomes that leadership and constituents will accept and embrace as long-term, trustworthy solutions to existential or structural challenges.

I have consistently encountered challenges in effecting and sustaining change in the culture and practices of faith communities. For judicatory entities, there is a tendency to focus on the geographic component in a local group's context. This challenging assumption tends to focus on either an immediate or an imposed set of assumptions about the group's missional identity and constitution. There are also assumptions about the endorsed and authorized leadership empowered by the judicatory to exercise authority in context. For judicatory authorities, this entails seeing the church's continuing presence over time as a social object. Structures and governing bodies that remain static are one facet of this objectification. The other facet is seeing clergy and other forms of ordained or ecclesial leaders in roles supporting those congregations as objects as well. It should be stressed that this objectification is not a process aimed at dehumanization. It is a way to understand that individuals who fulfill roles requiring legitimation stand as social

objects. We will discuss this further in this section. This rendering of a social object tends to focus on the narrative and missional identity of the local context, rather than on the impact of transformation work carried out by the endorsed leadership within the judicatory authority.

A pastoral theology of trust, when aligned with the social concepts of legitimation and validation, allows the leadership of a community of faith at both the local and judicatory levels to assess and work with all those responsible for articulating a missional and cultural identity in the local congregation. They provide a common ground to meet, connect, share, and renew the core elements of a church's identity, and thus provide a way for them to evaluate and embrace the dynamic, changing environments in which they exist and serve in the name of Christ Jesus.

Being able to see where and how a local community or its leadership is experiencing a loss of cohesion or direction of purpose, while at the same time partnering with them in reflecting on how best to renew their missional context and cultural identity, is our desired outcome, over and against anything that might be weighted as success or failure of any one particular effort on the part of those same parties. A missional and cultural identity that can hold validation in process and support the legitimation of an individual or group is not easily evaluated in such a binary manner. This study supports a more nuanced, dynamic, and adaptive system of continual revaluation, analysis, and discerning reflection on the quality of shared narratives and relationships, over and against positive increases in any one bottom-line judgment.

The narrative construct of a community as it articulates its missional and cultural identity is ripe ground for constructive work on the theological infrastructure of the group

and its leadership, as well as an underpinning for its ability to proffer legitimacy to its leadership and its ability to form a vital and stable consensus on its structures and methods of executing and adapting ministry to a rapidly changing environment. The core of a narrative construct evolves along two distinct lines of discernment for the leadership of a community of faith. One element of the narrative is widely accepted and validated by the members responsible for its curation and conservation. It is, quite literally, the “story that we tell ourselves.”

That interior narrative is often founded in historical and proprietary structures of memory and legend.¹ A memory is an element of curated interior narratives, in that what happened to us and how we responded to that moment can offer clarity of perspective on the values that define a church for others who come later, after that seminal moment. A legend is a narrative element that conveys meaning beyond the simple context of memory. When a living testamentary agent for an event is no longer present in the community, a legend can be passed down to successive generations after personal testimony becomes impossible. Both memory and legend may be erroneous or distorted from the actual occurrence, but, invariably, even those errors and distortions can lend support to the community's internal narrative and subsequent validation.

An exterior narrative is consistently and reliably available to most communities. Still, it is often not sought out or incorporated into the church's discernment of its evolving

¹ A habitus incorporates the aspects of cultural life that we have learned so well that we have forgotten the we learned them at all. Mary Clark Moschella, *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice: An Introduction*, Second edition (The Pilgrim Press, 2023), 71.

missional and cultural identity. In contrast to the interior narrative discussed above, the exterior narrative is not so much “the story we tell ourselves.” It is, instead, “the story people tell about us.” This inquiry is invested in local gossip or in salacious commentary. It is also not derived from using exterior opinions about a church to undermine its sense of worth or meaning in its existence or purpose. Rather, discerning exterior narratives can deepen understanding of context, offering a church community a lens for discerning how their actions and presence have impacted others beyond their sense of self-definition. Exterior narratives can also be used as templates for interpreting long-held interior narratives in new and innovative ways. A church tends not to see itself as a resource for people in the community who are hungry, but rather as an external narrative that credits it and its small food pantry with having a historic impact on local families seeking food. That narrative can challenge that assumption and alter its self-perception.

For a leadership group to understand how external narratives about its existence are formed and perceived, it must recognize that the opinions and observations of others affected by its missional and cultural identity are shaped by its actions and presence within a broader context than their own day-to-day perspectives.² There may be elements of that exterior narrative set that challenge some of its own internal narrative assumptions. There may also be surprising confirmation, even the elevation of

² Hearing so many stories may be confusing or perplexing. It takes a good deal of courage to listen, especially at the level of supporting someone to new and authentic speech. Moschella, *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice*, 176.

meaningful feedback points, in their efforts to be the people they hope to be, assume to be, or desire to be in their missional and cultural context.

Seeking and affirming external narratives can be a challenging experience for churches struggling to articulate or renew their missional and cultural identity. That inquiry requires a willingness to set aside assumptions about themselves that may have deep roots in their sense of self and validation. As well, it might be difficult for those groups to see external narratives from other groups as contributing to their own evaluative processes. The further from the perceived center of validation and legitimation, the more difficult it can be for leadership bodies to accept their perceptions as valid or important.

By being open to external narratives about how their own missional and cultural identities are expressed, leadership groups are primed to gain greater awareness of the possibilities for evolution and change. They will be able to find their own internal analyses and discernments supported, even as their certainties about their journeys are confronted with incongruities that will challenge them to change and adapt their missional identity to new circumstances in their environment.

Holding a creative tension between those interior and exterior narratives as a leadership group evaluates its missional and cultural identity comes at a high cost. Holding those perspectives in tension to generate creative engagement with existentially provocative questions is unsettling. Those periods of discernment can consume a great deal of time and attention for individuals and subgroups that have not prioritized the same

will to discern clarity around missional and cultural identity as others may have, whether or not there is widespread consultation within the group.³

Membership constituencies and the shifting constellations of relationships that form churches lack the root assumptions that many cultures need to feel confident in their missional identity. Most small communities seek a sense of continuity in membership to feel linked in a deep, rich way, lines that members assume convey deep, rich transfers of trust.

Local congregations, though, tend to exhibit more transient membership, thus fostering a more tenuous engagement with their missional identity over time, which most judicatory authorities assume should take precedence. Part of this study examines how a missional identity can be both a social process that encourages validation by involved members and a trustworthy social object that can be described in dynamic flux over time.

In this project, we identify those challenges, build a taxonomy of how groups organize around and resolve those challenges, and then focus on the following:

- How can a faith community's local, regional, and judicatory leadership foster and sustain the local group's ability and confidence in forming strategies and tactics

³ The job of ethnography, or one of them anyway, is indeed to provide, like the arts and history, narratives and scenarios to refocus our attention; not, however, ones that render us acceptable to our selves by representing others as gathered into worlds we don't want or can't arrive at, but ones that make us visible to ourselves by representing us and everyone else as cast into the midst of a world full of irremovable strangeness we can't keep clear of. Clifford Geertz, *Available Light: Anthropological Reflections on Philosophical Topics* (Princeton University Press, 2000), 84.

that forge sustainable and adaptive responses to their unique needs as they adapt to a rapidly changing societal environment?

- How can the observational tools of anthropology, sociology, practical theology, and ethnographic studies be applied to allow these leadership tiers to empower local leaders to articulate and innovate solutions that encompass both the constitutional structures of their past and the constellation of issues in the communities surrounding them?⁴
- The formation of clear and practical outcomes with a positive and term-adaptive response among leaders and leadership groups is often bound to a primary understanding and application of the social theories of legitimation and validation.

Several sociologists have produced seminal work on group processes, and their explorations offer insights into legitimation and validation, as well as the emergence of status structures in social groups. Legitimacy is best understood as a foundational investment in a social object (an individual) that confers endorsement, authorization, and propriety. The sociologists Cathryn Johnson, Timothy Down, and Cecelia Ridgeway, in their work on legitimation as a social process, sought to define how individuals and groups gain and lose their grasp of the ability to work with social practices and structures over time.⁵ In that context, we can see that those processes focus on both social objects,

⁴ The main difference is that when ‘we’ look back, ‘the Other’ appears to us as ancestral. It is what we somehow led on, however vagrantly, to the way we live now. Geertz, *Available Light*, 121.

⁵ Cathryn Johnson et al., “Legitimacy as a Social Process,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 32 (2006): 53–78, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/29737731>.

such as individuals, and social processes, the ways groups interact and reach consensus. They identify the ways those two processes unfold as bound to a trifold balance of contributions on the part of or on behalf of the object or process involved.⁶

To illustrate legitimation: a Rector in the Episcopal Church is first called and elected by the Vestry of the Parish (Endorsement). They are then approved by the bishop for the call/election and installed by that Episcopal authority at a local celebration of the new ministry (Authorization). Once authorized and endorsed, it is incumbent on the Rector to act in a manner consistent with the local community's expectations for that role (Propriety). Over time, the Rector can affect that requisite propriety, but only to the extent that the group maintains a consensus that their behavior falls within the role's expectations and assumptions.

When expressed in a social process by a group, that same triumvirate of characteristics is seen as validation. An example of validation as a process in legitimation theory is when a Church Board or Vestry needs to make a policy decision. A given Board is tasked with crafting a policy regarding the wider church's adoption of a liturgical innovation. Before a leader can decide on this new practice, they must build a broad, coherent support matrix. Not everyone can be assumed to be supportive of or empowered to decide whether the new practice can be enacted. Still, the group's leadership must craft

⁶ "Finally, we show how the legitimation of the status quo that is, the acceptance of widespread consensual schemas/beliefs and patterns of behavior often fosters the stability of actions and practices that are created as a result of these new individual and collective social objects." Johnson et al., "Legitimacy as a Social Process," 54.

both a process and a communication model that engages the broader community and enables the group not only to understand but also to embrace the new practice as aligned with the group's fundamental assumptions about its missional identity. When these two facets of social organizational principles are described (legitimation and validation), it can be noted that faith in ordered relationships and trust in perceived or expected outcomes is possible.

These concepts of legitimation and validation derive from a body of work in the social sciences that examines how groups organize around tasks and how individuals within those groups rise to specific status roles.⁷ Most of these concepts are underpinned by the assumption that social organizations are continually evolving, placing them in a state of flux, while also presenting momentary sensations of a status quo.⁸

As we seek to apply these social theories to our development of a pastoral theology of trust, the challenge will be to foster convergence between how leaders in the church perceive the concepts of legitimation and validation and a construct grounded in

⁷ "Once we acknowledge that culture is inconsistent-that people's norms may deviate from what the media represent as normal, or that our preconscious images and discursive accounts of a phenomenon may differ-it becomes crucial to identify units of cultural analysis and to focus attention upon the relations among them." Paul DiMaggio, "Culture and Cognition," *Annual Review of Sociology* 23 (1997): 265, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2952552>.

⁸ The Weberian formulation offers the central insight that legitimation occurs through a collective construction of social reality in which the elements of a social order are seen as consonant with norms, values, and beliefs that individuals presume are widely shared, whether or not they personally share them. Consequently, legitimacy is indicated by actors' compliance with a social order as either (a) a set of social obligations, or as (b) a desirable model of action (quoting Walker, 2004) Johnson et al., "Legitimacy as a Social Process," 55.

theological and hermeneutical contexts. Can we see and understand that a 20th-century social theory can not only support basic theological and ecclesiological expectations of the historic church (in total and in local manifestations)? A rooted connection that is sensible and appealing will also allow a general level of acceptance and adaptation.⁹

Sociological Concepts of Legitimation and Validation

Studies in the social sciences on organizational formation support the development of tools for analyzing and transforming a community's missional identity. Johnson, Dowd, and Ridgeway (2006) have built upon the organizational studies in sociology posited by Weber, Berger, and others to posit that the legitimation of a social object (an individual) or a social process (consensus on an institutional or constitutional structure) can foster the complex sets of relationships required to either gain or lose appeal to a larger group.

Change will fail or be stultified if a social object in authority appears to lack, or to act in a manner that erodes or corrodes, its legitimated role. If leaders fail to secure validation from the wider group, their ability to forge and hold consensus on any concept that challenges the status quo will also falter.¹⁰ This study leverages these social science tools (Legitimation and Validation Theory and the analysis of Group Dynamics) and

⁹ We see how practices, such as modern personnel systems and conduct in decision-making groups based on status characteristics, become taken-for-granted features in a wide variety of organizations, even when they are inefficient and inequitable. Johnson et al., "Legitimacy as a Social Process," 54.

¹⁰ A great deal of literature in pastoral theology seeks to help identify, diagnose and even assist in resolving intractable conflict in parishes that is centered around crises in parochial authority. The degradation of legitimated roles using social science in conjunction with pastoral theology might be a source of further, fruitful exploration.

anthropological tools (ethnographic observation and applied cultural studies) to craft functional practices. These practices will empower leadership in these venues to observe, articulate, and reach a consensus on experimental models they can apply to their missiological practices. As the group prepares for each project phase, the leaders will guide them through exercises to build their observational skills.¹¹

Contrasting Narratives

Groups will recount relevant narratives that illustrate their core missional identity and the issues they find challenging. By collaborating to form a core document or visual representation of that information, the group will then be able to observe its missional identity and, with support, reach a reasonable consensus on its veracity.

This work involves discrete groups (congregations, regions, and at least one judicatory community) being led through exercises to explore and understand their current cultural and missiological identity. They will develop a set of context-centered exercises in collaboration with their leaders to gain a clear picture of their current organization. These exercises will evaluate their ability to observe, interact, and align with their surrounding communities.

In preparation for these exercises, the leaders of each group will participate in developing a social survey of their leadership structure and current missional and cultural

¹¹ Exploring a congregation's life in historical detail and understanding how it came to be the way it is now lays the groundwork for the congregation to begin to re-evaluate its purpose and calling. Moschella, *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice*, 18.

identity. This survey will provide a framework for the wider leadership group to set project goals. The survey will first ask the primary leader/contact to describe their missional identity as they perceive it. What is the narrative of the community as the leader describes it? How can that leader best estimate the community's missional identity, considering its apparent cultural structure? How does it express that narrative in context? Is the community, by the leader's estimation, healthy and resilient enough to weather a deeper examination of its perception of its missional identity and any factors that might indicate dissonance, disruption, displacement, or dislocation of those ideals?

With this focus on how a leader is supported through endorsement, authorization, and propriety, their perspective on the identity and organizational ethos of their group is paramount to being able to facilitate the group's building consensus on their current missional identity and to create a point soon wherein they will be able to reflect on this process and embrace the changes they attempted as natural and culturally commensurate to their core, articulated, values and assumptions. Without that primary perspective from the leader (and, by extension, influential stakeholders and thought leaders in the community), the project will flounder.

Jesus as both Social Object and Social Process

To understand the roots of a pastoral theology of trust and the ways that theology can support deep, radical, and durable transformation of missional identity and culture in a community, a deeper illustration of the manner in which the legitimation of a social object is established, and how a social process gains validation through the forging of consensus. Our example is the person of Jesus Christ. In the Gospels, several instances arise in which Jesus is presented as a social object. In John's Gospel, the prologue

provides the paradigmatic example of a social object. Jesus is portrayed as the divine logos of God, who was before creation, through whom creation was accomplished, and in whom the glory of God dwells. After his baptism in the River Jordan, as Jesus comes up from the water, the voice from heaven declares him the Son, the Beloved.¹² Additionally, John the Baptist declares him as the one who is to come, the one whose sandal he is not worthy to untie, the lamb of God himself.

In these ways, Jesus receives both endorsement and authorization to function as a social object. In the subsequent accounts of his healing, teaching, and leadership, he strives to set the example of the proper behaviors expected of the messiah. Thus, we see the three aspects of legitimation being tendered.

By seeing Jesus as a social process, the synoptics offer a clear example: Jesus asks the disciples who people say he is. As the group works through the different options the crowds have offered, we see them evaluate his query by clarifying how his work, witness, and person are construed. It is Peter who claims the consensus when he confesses Jesus as the Messiah, the one coming into the world. The point of validation is first affirmed, and then we see it erode when Jesus opines that the validation of that ideal is true only if the community around him can transform its expectations of the messiah's

¹² "It's true that faith implies some degree of positive attitude toward the state of affairs in question; but adding such an attitude to belief is still not sufficient for propositional faith. Far from salvaging a reductionist strategy of analyzing faith in terms of belief, this move shows that in addition to finding an appropriate belief component, the reductionist would have to show this belief to imply an appropriate attitude." Robert Audi, "Faith, Belief, and Rationality," *Philosophical Perspectives* 5 (1991): 218, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2214096>.

purpose and work through a reinterpretation of his revelation that death and resurrection are propitious and valid, over and against their own impositions of previous models of salvation and deliverance.¹³

The Theme:

The current culture of most mainline denominations presents a dire portrait of institutional decline.¹⁴ At the same time, there is evidence in the broader culture beyond the doors of the local church that communities can articulate a deep desire for spiritual leadership, guidance, and support. Also, most temporal institutions demonstrate a deficit in moral, ethical, and spiritual accountability, favoring self-protection and perpetuation.

Institutional identity is a core element of how any congregation or judicatory defines itself. To maintain that identity over time, the community must enact and affirm core social objects that can serve as touchstones for successive generations. At the same time, those successive generations must be able to place their mark on these identity elements. The ability of a community to adapt its standards of belief and self-definition

¹³ “There are apparently two main kinds of faith, and this distinction applies both to religious faith and to other kinds. One kind is faith in-which I shall call attitudinal faith. It may be illustrated by faith in other human beings, as well as by faith in God. The second is faith that-propositional faith. It is commonly exemplified by faith that a friend will recover from an illness. I in” Audi, “Faith, Belief, and Rationality,” 215.

¹⁴. Many writers on denominational identity and construct point out that the large denominational churches and judicatories of the previous century have struggled with the burden of their need to sustain particular development models and institutional constructs. Cf., James Hudnut-Beumler and Mark Silk, eds. *The Future of Mainline Protestantism in America* (Columbia UP, 2018); Brian Kaylor and Beau Underwood. *Baptizing America: How Mainline Protestants Helped Build Christian Nationalism* (Chalice Press, 2024)

during a period of rapid change can create intense stress and reveal areas of lack of consensus or even conflict that were not anticipated. This rise in conflict can lead a group to feel its understanding of its basic organizational principles is under threat. With that awareness of the danger, anxiety in the group can cause it to attempt to assert in defense of its institutional identity over and against the needs of the group in the current environment.¹⁵

Institutional survival is often not the stated goal of a faith community. Usually, when queried, most communities point to creeds, confessional documents, and mutual agreement on statements that convey consensus-forged understandings of mission or vision statements. The challenge in those affirmations is that they are often forged by consensus or offered by a leader at a particular moment in the community's life. It becomes a placeholder for identity rather than a dynamic, adaptive expression of a legitimized, validated missional identity that membership, local pastoral leadership, and the broader judicatory entities can embrace and use to effect.

Faith communities tend to prioritize action- or service-related goals in their missional identity. Faith groups and their leadership encounter conflict when either their consensus around their mission identity is compromised or when groups feel leaders have

¹⁵ Changes in the activities of the organization may improve transactions with stakeholders leading to more positive outcomes. However, changes may lead to transactions that could have negative or mixed impacts on stakeholders who are directly interacting with the organization. The introduction of externalities could also lead to unintended consequences and spillover effects that impact stakeholders who are not a direct party to the transaction. Aimee L. Franklin, *Stakeholder Engagement* (Springer, 2020), 27, <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-47519-2>.

failed to act appropriately in their endorsed and authorized roles. In this context, populations have expressed a desire for a spiritually centered, holistically effective moral compass. If those factors are absent, members are continually alienated by institutional structures that reinforce self-interest.

An anecdotal reference to this level of self-interest occurred recently when a priest in my diocese contacted their Bishop, seeking counsel regarding a group of parishioners who, in the priest's view, were behaving in a confrontational and obstreperous manner. After meeting with the group, the bishop informed the priest that they had told them to treat the priest more favorably and not to drive the priest away from the parish to avoid problems they might have when calling their next priest. The point of view of the judicatory was to see the parish as fixed in its identity relative to the presumed mobility of the priest in that situation. Instead of working in the incumbent priest's best interest of improving the present moment, the judicatory chose to look past that tenure to a time when they might next have to interact with that parish's leadership: in transition. This study will attempt to help both local pastors and judicatory authorities reestablish common points of reference, even consensus, around the social object of missional identity in the regional context, while engaging creatively with a broader judicatory authority that can pivot and adapt to rapidly changing local contexts.

The central focus of this project is to develop a practical methodological set of tools to assist leaders and leadership groups in understanding, embracing, and shepherding dramatic change over a brief period. These tools integrate the above theoretical concepts and practical solutions, enabling leadership groups to function effectively across local, regional, and judicatory structures.

Disruption, Dislocation, Displacement, and Dissonance

When examining the factors that can erode or corrode trust within a group, the four states noted above have had a significant impact. If one or more of these traits are present in a group, a leader can reach a consensus on the next viable steps to address the conflict.

When those elements compound, achieving effective and sustainable conflict resolution or forming a valid consensus becomes more challenging. *Dissonance* is the group's experience of a lack of connection and continuity with its previous assumptions about its identity. What has worked in the past no longer feels effective now.

Disruption occurs when an individual or subgroup in the community intentionally seeks to cause unrest within the system, usually due to a lack of trust in the leader or a perceived threat to their sense of identity. *Dislocation* is the tangible sense of a group or individual being removed or expelled from their former roles in the community, which can lead to conflict or confrontation. *Displacement* is the experience of an individual or group being cut off from access to familiar spaces or routines, leading to a sense of alienation.

A Theological Etymology of Trust

Looking at the literature on legitimation and validation, the distinct requirement to invest trust in individuals granted leadership roles is paramount. To achieve recognizable, measurable improvements in institutional identity structures aligned with a missional identity, trust is a key driver of positive outcomes.¹⁶

¹⁶ Questions about the church may be interesting to anyone, but those of us connected to church communities today have skin in the game. Our questions come from a place of

Trust and Risk

Suppose a leader is adept at seeing and understanding their role in building legitimation in their office and forging consensus via transparent validation processes. In that case, a foundation of trust can be forged and used to benefit the community. For a community to risk the elements that form the core of its missional identity, a leader must provide a theological and pastoral justification for that membership to risk changes in practice or self-definition. Exploring the dynamics of trust and risk evaluation best illustrates an individual's (or group's) choice to ride an amusement park roller coaster.

When an individual boards a roller coaster, they place their body and safety in the hands of several other people and institutions, most of whom are not visible to them now. A group may choose to line up for a ride together, but everyone must decide whether to commit to the ride. Peer pressure may encourage them, but each rider is responsible for taking their own seat. The rider trusts the operator to ensure that the machine operates correctly at that moment. They also trust the operator to act quickly and appropriately if something goes wrong. The rider trusts the amusement park management to perform the necessary safety checks and repairs on the roller coaster's mechanical components. They also trust the designers, engineers, fabricators, and technicians who created and built the roller coasters. Ultimately, the rider trusts that all these groups and institutions are invested in providing a healthy, life-preserving, enjoyable, and safe experience.

personal significance as we strive to be faithful in cultural contexts that are rapidly changing. Whatever the church is called to be today, it is neither brand new nor unrelated to how it began. (page 5) Troy M. Troftgruben, *Rooted and Renewing: Imagining the Church's Future in Light of Its New Testament Origins* (Fortress Press, 2019).

All that trust can be traced to the moment the rider lets the roller coaster car's harness click down over their body. In trusting the harness, the rider trusts every element of that roller coaster, and everyone involved in its creation and operation. Our challenge in this project is to articulate at a pastoral and theological level the complex processes of forging trust in the individuals who are local and judicatory leaders, as well as working with those processes to forge new tools to lead people in being able to see, interact with and reforge their social processes in such a way that their ability and talents to incept profound change in their missional identities becomes an executable skill.

Forming a Missional Identity and Trust Project

Working with these goals in hand, the group will set aside time to explore, reflect on, and evaluate their shared understanding of their missional identity and the desired outcomes of the projects they form.¹⁷ That agreement will also support the development of a project idea and align mission identity with missional practice. I hope to craft a written, referential agreement with each community based on the quotient of institutional trust. Each group will reach consensus on their level of mutual trust among themselves and with their leaders.

The core of this exercise is to assist the groups through adaptive experimentation with practices to evaluate outcomes. It is also an effort to guide them through a

¹⁷ First, we must give some coherent understanding to the kind of "trust" we find operating in the concept of faith. If we are to comprehend what it means to have faith in God, then we must have on hand a good analysis of what it means to trust in general. Second, we must provide a more rigorous or illuminating account of how exactly faith and trust are related.

transformative reflective experience, leading to a deeper understanding of their social origins. It will also familiarize their stakeholders with the values that guide groups through high-risk/high-cost experiences as they attempt to initiate profound and dramatic change over relatively short periods.¹⁸

Over several years, I have developed a thesis on mission identity for faith communities that examines how the challenges posed by multiple stakeholder groups and the complex constellations of formal and informal social structures within a community's cultural matrix contribute to the formation of a firm (or weak) missional identity. Suppose a group can reach consensus on how its constellation of missional identity is formed and sustained. In that case, there may be a clear path for a leader to support that community in a work of profound and transformational change. If there is a lack of consensus within that cultural structure or legitimation from the leaders, we can expect varying levels of conflict.

Affirming that the broader culture is changing faster than most historical religious institutions can adapt, this study will support leaders as they guide anxious groups through stress-inducing transformations. At the root of this query lies a curiosity about how parish leadership and those holding influence in parish and judicatory structures

¹⁸ Changes in the activities of the organization may improve transactions with stakeholders leading to more positive outcomes. However, changes may lead to transactions that could have negative or mixed impacts on stakeholders who are directly interacting with the organization. The introduction of externalities could also lead to unintended consequences and spillover effects that impact stakeholders who are not a direct party to the transaction. Franklin, *Stakeholder Engagement*, 27.

express and invest trust in a leader's legitimated role, or in the process by which decisions are made for and on behalf of the community. We will also examine how challenging it is for groups to reach consensus on both the leader's legitimated role and their own perceptions of the church's cultural and mission identity. Inherent in this reflection is an understanding that most churches express either a credal or confessional set of identifying markers. In other words, we know who we are because we can subscribe to an exterior confirmation or reaffirmation of our basic, theological, and constitutional assumptions about God, each other, and how we are to interact with the world around us. There is a tendency for groups to concretize these assumptions and end up treating their cultural sensibilities as certitudes about themselves and those they deem "other." To overcome those certainties, a significant amount of trust must exist among the members of the church community.

Trust is an essential concept formed between individuals and groups across cultures and societies. Most Western explorations of trust focus on a transactional or relational valuation. Trust requires an answer to the following questions: Do we trust a person? Do we have trust in an institution? There are some *a priori* assumptions we carry into most of these interactions, making it easy to treat trust as a transactional or quantifiable element in a relationship.

When relationships become more complex, or more individual agents are engaged in everyday shared life and work toward a focused purpose, the assumption of a quantifiable element of trust leads to the commensurate assumption that the degree or amount of trust to offer or receive is finite. In addition to that assumption of finitude, we can also easily assume that trust acts as a coin or token to be exchanged as a sign of

merit. We can grant or invest in trust, but that underscores an essential quality of trust: it is not so much an object as something that flows between the agents involved in the relationship.

Trust and the “Uncanny Valley”

The computer and robotics expert Masahiro Mori posited in *Bukimi no tani* (1970) that human beings offer a particular response to being shown objects that express near-human features but fail to reproduce a satisfactory simulation of a real person’s face. He describes that response to an image, and by extension, a concept that violates what a person trusts as acceptable and accurate, as the “uncanny valley.”¹⁹ When an individual is presented with a figure that fails to meet a satisfactory standard, it triggers unease, even revulsion. When confronted with ideas or practices that trigger this response, a group might express these same misgivings. Our current social environment, influenced by social media feeds, artificial intelligence, and algorithmically driven search engines, has, around most communities, forged a form of self-definition that is highly, if not entirely, subjective to what each individual consumes in terms of perspectives, information, and contextual content. People confronted with ideas or concepts that differ significantly from what they have become accustomed to over time may even reject a favorable notion

¹⁹ “The uncanny valley effect is a hypothesized psychological and aesthetic relation between an object's degree of resemblance to a human being and the emotional response to the object. The uncanny valley hypothesis predicts that an entity appearing almost human will elicit uncanny or eerie feelings in viewers.” “Uncanny valley,” *Wikipedia*, March 16, 2026, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Uncanny_valley&oldid=1343874436.

simply because it fails to inspire a sense of connection, resonance, or comfortable acceptance.

The study of trust at the organizational level of parishes and judicatory bodies allows us to identify concepts and practices that might cause discomfort within the group, such as Mori's uncanny valley. If we can support a leader's legitimation and, in turn, build a healthy infrastructure of trust in the group's process of forming and projecting validation, then we can avoid triggering either the erosion or corrosion of confidence in the group, even amid rapid or dramatic changes in cultural structures or practices.

This study focuses on a systematic pastoral theology of trust. Throughout the reflection on this project's construction, a persistent theme is that leaders must inspire confidence (trust) in the group or community to which they are entrusted. This factor of trust is developed, invested in, and maintained by leaders' abilities to support the group's transitions through cusps of transformation, preserving their legitimacy and promoting consensus on the actions to be taken. Reflecting on how trust is generated, accrued, and either expressed or lost will help us consider the theological impact of these exercises and evaluative tools in the context of the greater alignment they support as the Body of Christ moves forward through this time of rapid cultural transformation.

Renewal of Trust and Mission Identity

Restoring Legitimation and Validation

Trust can be lost between individuals within a particular community or set of relationships. Once lost, like the parable of the lost coin, it cannot be offered or possessed again until that trust is restored. Trust, however, is not a possession to provide as a gift,

nor an exchange that ensures security in any given set of relationships. It cannot be transactional, as trust is, in itself, a way of being in a relationship with a person or a group. Trust, even in an institution, cannot exist in and of itself without a sense of constant renewal and circulation.²⁰ Once we see trust as an essential element of any set of relationships focused not so much on a transacted, favorable outcome as on relationships.

When the consensus around a leader's role or the group's identity is in question, what factors can help us assess and address these issues to achieve more favorable outcomes? There is also curiosity about how those outcomes confirm or affirm the group's root missional identity. Suppose those outcomes fall too far outside an accepted, validated, or legitimate level of recognition. Can the group accept or adapt to those new or revised parameters? A new pastor is charged by the congregation's leadership to "grow the church," with the expectation of both numerical growth and discipleship maturation. The new pastor does precisely that, but in seeking a positive outcome, she brings about her own demise when the leading group loses the capacity to recognize its church amid complex, intensifying competition from newcomers to define its mission identity.

²⁰ Validity and propriety are primary sources of legitimacy that are reinforced by *authorization* and *endorsement*. Authorized social orders have the positive evaluation and support of high status actors. Support implies approval...and a willingness to supply resources...Edward J. Lawler et al., eds., *Handbook of the Social Psychology of Inequality*, 1st ed. 2014, Handbooks of Sociology and Social Research (Springer Netherlands : Imprint: Springer, 2014), <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-017-9002-4>.

Finally, what might be the theological and anthropological foundation for engaging these groups and individuals to assist them in adaptive innovation of practices and in renovating their missional identity?²¹

In casting about for an appropriate metaphor for the pressure that change in a system can create for a community and its individual members in their roles, we can consider the image of a pipe containing a flow of material. Under pressure, the material flows in an intended direction. Water moves through a main pipeline into various individual homes. Those homes then have systems that convey the water to the taps and outlets for the home's occupants to use. Because pressure is maintained at one end of the system and fluid dynamics indicate that pressure can increase or decrease depending on the diameters of the pipes and lines involved, different stresses on the system can be calculated to allow the water to flow unimpeded. If water is the element and energy of change a system experiences, then unwanted or unwarranted alterations like this can create issues for the system. Additionally, if the system itself is subject to an agency whose integrity is suspect, problems will arise.

Trust is a deep component of every leader's relationship with community members. Trust is founded on the assumption that we are willing to invest in and project

²¹ Human systems are "open," in the sense of being perpetually involved with their physical and social environment and, therefore, perpetually being influenced and, in turn, trying to influence that environment. We need to understand what then triggers "managed" change, the desire for someone to deliberately change something that is currently in a quasi-stationary equilibrium? Edgar H. Schein and Peter A. Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership* (John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated, 2016), 322, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/drew-ebooks/detail.action?docID=4766585>.

onto a leadership structure the necessary accommodations to ensure that a subgroup or individual is not only empowered to act on behalf of the community but also to make decisions that will impact the community's life in the future.²² In other words, we base our desire for outcomes that haven't yet come to pass on the relationships we have forged in the past and continue to experience in the present.

I have considered trust to be a valuation placed in a social object, and have worked under the assumption that valuation is a return on the social investment people make in their leaders. In other words, could trust be quantifiable? Is it a measured commodity we can then apply to an issue or challenge? Is social capital something that we can accrue over time?

That image and allusion fail when we realize that trust is not all that quantifiable. We can see it as a qualitative experience, thus expressing trust in someone or a particular institution. There is a sense of finitude to the amount of trust we are willing to invest in a leader. Still, how does that trust give way, and when does a leader lose that trust?

What a conundrum. Trust does not take up volume or space. It has no mass, no volume. Yet we speak of it as something a leader possesses in quantity, and to lose trust is to lose one of the most essential requisites for being a leader. The argument can then be

²² Each of the four domains of emotional intelligence--self-awareness, self-management, social awareness and social management--adds a crucial set of skills for resonant leadership. Daniel Goleman et al., *Primal Leadership: Realizing the Power of Emotional Intelligence* (Harvard Business School Press, 2002), 30.

made that trust is an intrinsic component of leadership, shaping its essential functions.²³

If a person can inspire and convince others of their leadership value, earning their trust, they are considered trustworthy. If that leader fails to hold that trust, then their leadership suffers. It loses valuation in the community.

Let's try an allegorical experiment:

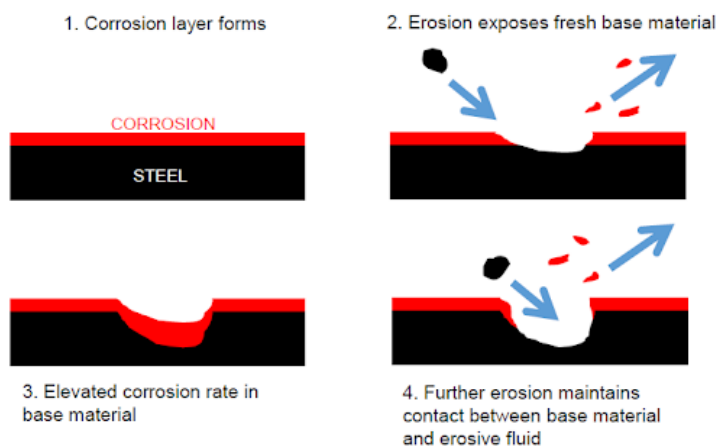
Trust is not so much the substance of a leader's interaction with a community and its membership as the articulation and element of construction that holds those processes together. Think of a boiler that heats a home. It is a series of mechanisms that transfer heat from one medium to another. The combusting heat from the firebox affects the water in the circulator. The circulator then pushes that hot water into the radiators. The air in the rooms above the boiler is warmed by the water in the radiator, and the room's occupants finally feel the warmth and notice the change in their environment.

Trust can be seen as the pipes and structures that hold the fire and vent the combustible exhaust. Trust is the manifold that captures heat and transfers it to the water. The pipes that carry hot water and distribute it to the rooms where people receive heat from radiators... another way leadership (fire) affects the community (room occupants).

²³ Questions about the church may be interesting to anyone, but those of us connected to church communities today have skin in the game. Our questions come from a place of personal significance as we strive to be faithful in cultural contexts that are rapidly changing. Whatever the church is called to be today, it is neither brand new nor unrelated to how it began. (page 5) Troftgruben, *Rooted and Renewing*.

All those systems affect the integrity of trust, the elements on which the system's clear function depends.

This is where trust is at risk of loss: erosion and/or corrosion. As that circulatory action of leadership functions, the elements in those media affect the systems of trust that hold all these relationships together. There may be components in the system that are adversely affected by their presence, as it primarily impacts the parts they touch and interact with. In a boiler, if the water in the system is contaminated or has a reactive pH,



the system will corrode. If there are "bits" that are banging around in the system and striking at the structures that contain essential elements, then erosion can happen.

When trust erodes or corrodes within a system, a deep, fundamental issue begins to affect the systems it supports. It might not be visible at first. There might not be any indication of a problem. The leaders might not be aware of the jeopardy facing the integrity of the systems that support their work. The community might not be immediately aware of the issues leaders are experiencing or even causing in their work and relationships with community members. Over time, the effects of erosion and/or corrosion are cumulative. Often, they go unnoticed until it is too late to seek restoration or repair. A severe crisis is usually the first sign of a loss of trust between leaders and their constituents.

The challenge with erosion and corrosion of trust is twofold: losses are cumulative and incremental, and those cumulative losses set the system up for a catastrophic failure. When internal buffeting from issues that batter the system's structure is present, the basis of trust erodes. When the accumulation of corrosive experiences is consistently unaddressed, the integrity of trust becomes vulnerable.

Both issues lead to failures that are often, surprisingly, catastrophic at a critical moment that seems unrelated.

Those pipe systems that hold and direct substances are not static. There is an inherent elasticity to any system that is in motion or has to set things that differ in construct from each other in proximity. Liquid flowing through a pipe is never pure. There are inevitably elements in the medium: sediment that creates friction or impacts the pipe walls, and compounds and molecules that interact negatively with the material's exposed substrate.

In the same way, social systems are structured and directed by conventions and cultural practices that shape the relationships among their constituents. Those social systems rely on connections and support that form a coherent, cohesive structure, allowing groups to interact, share meaning, and relate to one another to achieve favorable outcomes from their efforts and ministrations. For those metaphorical systems, like the plumbing noted above, when erosion (substances that undermine the integrity of the containing and directive forces of water flow) causes the system to lose integrity, you can get leaks or breakages. When systems are loaded with reactive elements, the loss of integrity results, and reactions and counterreactions foster wear and further degrade the system's integrity.

Adopting the four “dis” elements that distort missional identity will be intrinsically valuable in this exercise. As the group assesses their situation, relational narratives, and theological assumptions about their current missional narratives, a more profound critique of how they express and experience disruption, displacement, dislocation, and dissonance will create a matrix of analytical elements for them to reflect on and use to their advantage.

The challenge of assessing and addressing the elements of distortion that foster erosion of trust or corrosion of a group's social and theological structures centers on the four areas noted above.

Conflict and Loss of Legitimacy

Disruption

Many disruptive elements can lead to positive adaptations in the system. At the same time, a significant amount of pastoral theological literature highlights the adverse effects of antagonistic or disruptive behaviors among participants in parish systems. For this study, we will focus on disruption as an element of interaction by a particular individual or group that erodes trust in the system, thereby breaking down consensus around missional identity. There is also an opportunity to reflect on the impact that particular individuals, leaders, or members outside the leadership group may have on the corrosion of trust in legitimizing the group's narrative. Ultimately, a disruptive element in the group's construction can lead to issues with the leader's authority or endorsement if the judicatory structures become involved.

Congregations are groups of people who gather over time, with membership changing as members arrive and leave. The purpose of gathering for a community as a congregation is best imagined as a murmuration of starlings, over and against the perceived, orderly constellation of a static structure. There is a chimeric assumption that congregations are as ordered as the architecture of a church suggests. People do not organize themselves in neat rows, even if they choose to sit in the same pews week after week. The gathering appears less orderly, and the presumption of consensus on perspective, identity, and purpose varies from person to person. Still, as each member interacts with the liturgy, the meeting agenda, and the other members gathered, some perceived patterns will emerge.

Embracing those dynamics can be challenging for any leader seeking to determine a coherent purpose for the group. At the same time that people gather for particular occasions, they also enter, abide, and then depart congregations in patterns akin to that same image of murmuration. From time to time, individuals and small groups will break away from the leading group. Some will continue to depart on a trajectory that deepens their separation from the whole. Others, having interactions that draw them back to the community, will find their momentary dislocation or displacement to be an opportunity to reframe their relationship to the whole of the community and then return to the interaction, the dance of that missional and cultural expression. At the same time, new members will contribute to the community's identity and enhance its dynamism. At no time is a congregation a static entity, though too often the presumption of elements within and around the community will lend it a more monolithic nature.

Arrivals and departures may be due to birth or death. Arrivals and departures may also be associated with the incorporation of new members who wish to join the group or with the departure of established members. The frequency of arrivals and departures in local congregations creates tension between those who perceive stable, consistent membership and those who see a more dynamic trend toward transience.

Concurrent with that perspective-dependent awareness of the stability of the community's membership, individuals and groups may also attempt to codify a mission or cultural identity for the community based on the interval of time they find to be the most stable constellation of relationships and roles around them and their primary groups. Long-time members may recall a time when the pews felt full, when the music was better or more appealing to their taste. They may remember a preacher who was more able to connect with their mindset. They might hold to a particular image of the church at a time when they felt most aligned with the community, or when they thought the community was most aligned with their historical or emotional expectations.

This desire for a leader to submit to historical/emotional expectations supports this notion of nostalgic recall. We also acknowledge that emotional recall is unreliable. Those perceptions are bound to both the timeliness and the highly subjective experiences of an individual or a small group. Those narratives might achieve some degree of resonance among others in the community, but are more likely to trigger other, individual reveries. Pastors and leaders continually face the challenge of leading people who remember what was, desire that sense or experience restored, and often choose the past over the present, much less an uncertain future. Those certitudes of the past lead to

disruptive conflict, as they tend to pit one individual or group's perceived state against others.

An illustration of disruption in parochial leadership due to erosive conflict: a Church is gifted a significant corpus of money intended by the donor as an unrestricted gift for the parish's mission, to be used as the leadership sees fit. The governing board receives the gift and establishes an endowment fund. At the time of establishing the fund, the leadership decides to restrict that fund's investment income to fund outreach efforts on behalf of the parish. The grant money available to the parish grows over time as the endowment principle increases.

After more than a decade of this policy, a new pastor and governing board review the endowment practices and discern that, in light of the changing dynamics of the investment climate, the needs of the parish, and the sentiment of the current leaders, the endowment draw will instead be placed in the general fund of the parish. The intention is to fund programs and ministries within the parish and to support the church's ongoing outreach grants. In addition to that change, the leadership also noted that parish volunteers were conducting more outreach rather than offering grants as monetary donations to outside charities.

When news of this change reached the former leadership, many of whom had left the parish in the intervening years, there was an outcry over the perceived disruption, which they saw as an assault on their decision-making authority. Although the former leaders have no current connection to the parish leadership, they perceived the new policy as a violation of their original intent to restrict an unrestricted fund. They also perceived the policy change as an erosion of the parochial and missional identity they had

experienced in the past and expected to continue. The conflict arising from these disruptions had a profound impact on how people perceived one another, on the historical and emotional expectations for how the endowment was intended to be received and administered, and on the day-to-day life of the parish across generations of leadership changes.

Disruption can also take apparently benign forms, eventually leading to deeper, corrosive, or erosive relationships among leaders tasked with determining or articulating a parish's emerging mission identity. Many professionals from non-ecclesiastical settings of work and study enter leadership positions in the church, presuming that their prior skills, training, and formation have prepared them to lead the parish. They may possess skills from the public or private spheres, or from both the for-profit/non-profit sectors.

Those skills and abilities might bring particular material gifts to bear for the benefit of the parish. They also tend to bring along the methodologies and assumptions of previous venues. A financial executive might be very skilled in fund accounting and institutional finance. That does not mean they can easily see a balance sheet and a budget as a theological narrative of the parish's mission identity. In fact, they might find it hard to reconcile the need for a positive bottom line in the worldly sense with a church attempting to grow its ministry by maintaining a more optimistic view of a small operating deficit.

For example, a senior parishioner joins the governing board. She has a long track record of success in the business world, first leading a for-profit company she inherited from her family, after starting in the proverbial mailroom. She attended a prestigious

business school and was awarded a degree with honors. During her career in the corporate world, she grew her company significantly and retired relatively young.

After retirement, she decided to give back to the world that had blessed her with success and created a non-profit foundation that quickly grew from a small startup into a large, successful charitable foundation with multiple smaller agencies and offices in transitional communities, helping hundreds of people. As the church's board of trustees meets to plan for the coming year's ministry and mission goals, she arrives excited for the work ahead, with a five-point plan she has crafted after studying the past five years of the church's financial records, membership rolls, and the board's minutes.

Though she intends to offer her absolute best work to God and the church, there is already significant tension surrounding her role on the board. Additionally, she finds that her sense of connection to the church's potential for growth seems at odds with how her peers receive her work. As an experienced executive, she knows she needs to change her approach. At the same time, she has a deeper awareness that what was once a promising and exciting new chapter for her is now a disruptive experience. It will take time for her and the board to restore trust in their shared processes.

Disruption is a notable event in the work of the church's leadership when it causes a loss of trust, whether because the people doing the job or the agencies responsible for ensuring the work is done within the church's routines fail. What once was an achievable end feels like failure within the systems of relationships that should form a cohesive, close team, with tasks done in a manner that conforms to the group's consensus on its mission identity, beginning to erode or corrode a sense of relationship and trust.

Displacement

The group's narrative theological core values are often held in trust by thought leaders in the community. These positions are usually perceived as high-status, and the influence that groups or individuals have over the narratives they use to shape consensus on their missional identity can sometimes exceed their material impact. When one of those individuals or groups is removed from, or transferred out of, their role, or the prominence that role holds in the group's identity structures, they may feel displaced. In reflecting on that impact, as leaders attempt to guide their community through adaptive change, displacement becomes a profoundly influential factor. The erosive effect of displaced leaders can lead groups to engage in behaviors that project a delegitimizing image of the core leadership.

The challenge of displacement also has a cumulative effect: When an individual or group experiences displacement, the perceived impact increases over time. A particular group might enjoy favored access to a specific room for their activities, and when deprived of that space, their resentment grows over time. An individual might be released from their role as a ministry leader due to a loss of ability or effectiveness, which may increase animosity toward the individual or group, thereby forcing that change.

A youth leader who has been effective in the past with several generations of youth groups begins to struggle with their health. It becomes apparent to the parish's pastoral leadership that this individual has come to rely on the youth group members and supporting volunteers to run the group's programs and events yet still insists on controlling the meeting agendas and taking the lead in program discussions with the lead pastor. After several months of escalating conflict and a growing sense of apathy among

the youth group, as they feel the stress and burden of leading themselves and increasingly feel alienated from the adult leader, the lead pastor asks the adult leader to consider stepping aside to allow new energy and direction in the group. The leader feels displaced and believes the pastor's erosive actions compromise their authority over their ministry.

A further example of displacement can be found in a lay staff member's loss of role as a worship leader: after an interim pastorate in which they were given broad authority to plan weekly worship services, the new pastor is called and chooses to plan them themselves. Although in many judicatories, the lead pastor is the canonical ordinary for worship decisions, the lay staff member is displaced by that action, and this leads to polarizing conflict after that corrosive decision forces members of the church to choose sides in a conflict they did not know they were invested in when the new pastor's call was issued.

Dislocation

From displacement, we experience groups or individuals being cut off from perceived access to, or opportunities to use or engage in, particular expected spaces or concurrent activities in formerly accessible locations. Dislocation expands that concept to the broader community. When either a portion of the group or the community itself experiences dislocation, they are cut off from spaces they once found comfortable, comforting, or affirming of their missional identity. Dislocation affects the community, as in the case of a natural disaster or a crisis with a severe local impact. A church building or complex might be destroyed by fire or flood. Deferred maintenance may render a building unsafe and lead to its condemnation.

Even defective plumbing, causing the loss of a bathroom or kitchen, something most churches can address promptly if needed, can cause enough dislocation to threaten the group's missional identity. Trust as a medium of understanding between individuals in the group is founded on knowing that the assembly can gather safely and, with some assurance, that their shared life will not be disrupted. Even a room left uncleaned over time can undermine a leader's or leadership group's legitimacy.

Two examples of how leadership group adaptations have had a dislocating effect on a leader's legitimated role follow: a long-serving pastor had, over time, crafted a method for maintaining consistency within their board and for developing new leaders to succeed retiring members. Moving outside the regular canons of their judicatory requirements, they created a subsidiary board that functioned structurally as the senior board did in governing the parish. The junior members were seen as integrated into the parish's leadership structures, despite having no canonical role. They were included at the main table during board meetings, even though they had no vote. Despite that inclusion, they had no other legitimate role other than to form and train leaders in a manner the group deemed sustainable with their mission identity.

Several generations of leaders rose to senior roles in the parish through that system, unaware that they were outliers in leadership transitions compared to the rest of their judicatory. A new pastor was called to serve and was presented with this outlier model. As they attempt to align the leadership structures with the rest of the judicatory, the board's tenured members react with consternation. They felt that the earned place of those rising members is being eliminated without reasonable cause. Also, when the pastor reorganized the monthly board meetings to distinguish between junior and senior

members, the junior members complained that they were being excluded from full fellowship with their seniors, as had been the custom for as long as anyone could recall. The new leader was blamed for displacing junior members from their leadership roles as the new leader ascended to parish leadership.

Another example of this sort of dislocative effect can be found in a pastor who was called to a parish where the previous incumbent had formed an advisory committee that, in practice, met the week before the main governing board to advise the pastor as the board's agenda was being formulated. The description of the committee given to the new pastor conveyed that it existed to guide and support the pastor in their role as chair of the board and leader of the parish.

Several elements in the parish used this group as a lever against changes they deemed unfavorable to their assumed role in validating the consensus on mission identity. The previous rector also formed it to address aspects of their own leadership that they felt were challenging. With a new pastor, the need for counsel changed, but the original group members' consensus failed to adapt to that transition. This led to escalating conflict as trust among the new pastor, the ad hoc committee, and members of the duly elected governing board deteriorated.

When an existential crisis struck the parish soon after the new pastor accepted the call to serve, the advisory group was challenged to support the rector through a series of critical decisions that it was neither prepared nor able to make, either canonically or as representatives of the contemporary constitution of the church's membership. The ensuing resolution of that crisis allowed the new pastor to see that this structure would be

a challenge to adapt to as circumstances and relationships within a shifting constellation of leadership changed.

Problems arose when the pastor began adding members to the committee who were not considered experienced or connected to the parish's deeper structures and relationships. Additionally, the older members of the committee expected the ability and agency to accept or reject the pastor's tactical or strategic efforts as the community's and the parish's needs evolved. After several years, as tensions between the committee members and the pastor increased, the pastor disbanded the committee.

Dissonance

The concept of dissonance is often noted as a compounding factor that amplifies the impact of the above elements. Dissonance occurs when a group's basic, root assumptions about itself are challenged. An agency outside the constellation of missional elements often proposes a notable and dramatic change in communal practice or the organization's social construct. The effect of dissonance on a congregation frequently erodes trust in the community's narrative fabric.

An example of that dissonance might be a dramatic change in the use of particular hymns or music during worship. It might be the broader judicatory adopting a new worship style or manual. There might be the assignment of a leader who does not align with the group's historical assumptions about their pastor's character or presentation. Dissonance is a prominent factor in conflict when the congregation's members are confronted with behaviors that violate their expectations of propriety. When a leader fails to act in ways the group recognizes or validates, the resulting dissonance fosters division.

Given the contributing factors noted above, those levels of perceived dissonance can exponentially exacerbate other sources of conflict.

When dissonance is present in a congregation's expression of narrative meaning, the congregation has likely also identified key indicators of a radical loss of confidence and trust in the leader. With more than one of these factors present, the explosive disruption of the validation and legitimation of parish leadership could result in catastrophic failure. This study reflects on ways in which these elements might be addressed and perhaps transformed by deep theological and applied anthropological methods that assist local groups and judicatory structures in holding the erosion and corrosion of trust as a possible resource for reclaiming and reviving vital missional identities in distressed communities of faith.

Oriented toward the transitional cusp points that too often intensify stress on already traumatized or wounded communities that have experienced perceived failures to adapt in recent years, the proposed structures may promote not only sustainable change but also greater adaptive resilience in these concentric areas of activity and identity.

Reaffirmation of Trust and Mission Identity

The core goal of a pastoral theology of trust is not to prevent conflict, the loss of a leader's legitimation, or the erosion of validation and consensus on missional and cultural identity within a faith community. The core goal of this theology is to guide how we approach renewing those elements in the face of conflicts that have eroded or corroded the frameworks through which the medium of trust is experienced, granted, and received in community. That reciprocity is needed at every level of a faith community's existence.

The peer-to-peer relationships between members require renewal. The vertical integration of parochial authority requires it to both function in the present moment and to form and equip leaders with strategic and tactical support. The transit of trust between legitimated leaders and their judicatory agents, who also offer authorization, requires the same network of trust. These vessels convey a sustaining context of mutual recognition, validation, legitimation, and care, as ministry is sustained and, in context, identities are supported over time.

Taking care to analyze and name the elements of a pastoral relationship that erode trust enables us to respond appropriately. Each of the four D's offers its own structures for forming considerate engagements with leaders, members, and judicatory agents. These are not siloed responses; each element of loss of trust can carry a corresponding response that is effective for the whole. Every aspect that contributes to a loss of trust in a system, an individual, or a consensus is inherently entangled with other elements among the concerned members. Seeking an integrated understanding of these factors should not be concerned with generating a gestalt view of the complex conflicts over the loss of trust, but rather with seeing both the constituent and contributory factors in relation to their linked positive responses.

We also need to assess the loss of validation in the mission identity consensus and the lack of legitimation in leadership as the renewal process begins. It is often challenging to invite leaders, leadership groups, and institutions into discernment processes that address the erosive or corrosive loss of trust in the church's missional identity. There are two factors contributing to this difficulty. The first is that admission of the loss of trust invites a period of recrimination. When confronted with a party's or

group's expression of a loss of trust, the first response is often to formulate a defense or apology for the actions or postures that led to that erosion or corrosion. The second factor is the assumption of oppositional conflict. Often, issues of delegitimation or invalidation arise from experiences outside the leader or the leadership group. When the leader internalizes those charges without acknowledging that they stem from experiences external to their intentions or self-perception, the natural tendency to adopt a defensive posture can lead to oppositional behaviors that may delay or impede renewal efforts.

Reconciliation

Both in response to disruptions in the church's missional identity processes and to the inevitable experiences of alienation and fracture that can lead to fractured pastoral and legitimation relationships. When these disruptive events occur, the leader or leadership groups are challenged to address them, move through mutual discernment to a validated response, and then effect a reconciliation between the alienated parties. Reconciliation often comprises three distinct aspects of engagement: forgiveness, the renewal of conditional trust, and commendation. Forgiveness allows each party to release any animosity they hold toward the other. The renewal of conditional trust established a probationary common ground in which each party could operate and work toward consensus and then accept re-legitimized roles within the culture. Commendation is the prayerful release of conflict, with a deeper awareness among the parties that not only have they reconciled with each other, but that the third-party engagement of God, as the ultimate custodian of their renewed relationship, is also affirmed.

Reconciliation can take many forms, some of which can renew the relationship between parties in conflict over delegitimation or loss of validation. The challenge of

reconciliation lies in each party's willingness to release expectations forged by either certainty or intransigence. Reconciliation requires a malleable perspective among all parties engaged in conflict. That malleability creates a climate in which the pressures on the exchange of trust are not overwhelming to the systems under stress.

To illustrate this point, a tenured pastor receives a request for a pastoral call from a former lay officer of the parish with whom she had been in conflict over several major church projects. The term of office for that lay leader had concluded, but there was still a sense of disconnect between them. Although the projects' outcomes were generally received positively by the majority of church members, the leader and pastor have been unable to reconnect since the conflict became part of their ongoing pastoral relationship.

At the appointment, the lay leader thanked the pastor for their time, and then proceeded to offer that although they had for a long time been certain that the manner and choices the pastor had enacted during those projects were wrong, in the aftermath and with time and prayer, they had come to see those choices as appropriate for the church. "I was convinced I was right and that you were wrong, but I see now that your leadership got us through that time," offered the lay leader. With that, the pastor was able to build a reconciliatory, reciprocal pastoral engagement with the lay leader, deepening their connection and reinvigorating trust in their relationship.

Restoration

Dealing with forms of dislocation involves working toward restoration for the parties involved across space and time, as they need to experience it on multiple levels. Restoration can involve a return to a role from which an individual or group has been unable to participate due to a loss of trust. Restoration can also include returning to a

physical space from which an individual or group has been expelled, along with addressing the reasons for the expulsion. In both cases, it is essential to convey that, because of dislocation from space or roles, the relocation process involves returning to a place or role that may be familiar, even though it has not been inhabited before. Renewal requires a willingness to form a new engagement with a role or space that can never be the one lost but can be resonant with the renewal being enacted between parties as they seek to overcome the erosion or corrosion of trust.

Entering a space restored after a critical incident offers a clear example of restoration: A church's worship space is condemned due to structural issues when portions of the ceiling fall and cracks appear in the plaster over the rest of the sanctuary. After assessing and consulting with building engineers and contractors, the leadership created a plan to use the church's parish hall for worship during the required repairs. One Sunday, the worshipping community gathered at the doors of the church, and the important furniture, worship vessels, and decorations were removed from the sanctuary and carried to the transitional space. The church then repaired the space, with the expectation among the membership that a return procession would be used to re-enter it.

Relocation challenges the desire many people have for community spaces and roles to serve as reliquaries of identity and story. To embrace and form a validated consensus that these changes are congruent with previous self and community images and expectations, the leader's ability to forge consensus and support a proprietary linkage between what was and what might be is an essential need for the community to preserve continuity of meaning and a renewed trust in its missional identity.

Relationship

The renewal of trust in a delegitimated or invalidated pastoral context is a unique challenge for many leaders. Like most pastoral engagements, being centered on the individual or group that has been subject to displacement from the core valuations of a role in the cultural or missional identity in the community requires mutual submission to a relationship that is broken, in need of reconciliation, and may entail feelings of fracture, even violation of deeply held aspects of identity and valuation.

Navigating the renewal of trust in a relationship can involve transitions in communication that significantly impact individuals and the community as a whole. Requisite to those transitions is a three-fold process of forgiveness, reconciliation with amends, and commendation. Forgiveness is an internal experience for each party. Reconciliation with amends involves the parties' accepting actions intended to reestablish and reforge trust in the relationship. Finally, in many circumstances, there can be a commendation to God for the factors that led to the loss of consensus on the nature of the relationship, and a renewed legitimation of the leader's role.

When a lay volunteer serves in a ministry for an extended period, expectations for the role tend to become fixed. If they are good at specific tasks, the group will tend to trust that the individual will continue to perform those tasks, even if they no longer want to or can do so at the same level as before. A senior member of the church, who has run an annual event for decades, asks to meet with the pastor to complain that they feel underappreciated and taken for granted. In talking with that parishioner, the pastor discovers that the volunteer leader has developed deep resentments toward the people on the event's planning committee, "because they just leave it to me and never help."

When asked whether the leader ever asked for help, the response was that they had done so just about a decade ago, but no one stepped in to assist, so they gave up. Noting the frustration and resentment, the pastor asked the leader what they liked about the ministry, and what they could do without. The leader said they miss liking the people they work with and resent always being the one who has to do everything. After the pastor suggested that the leader retire from the role to end the negative experience and renew the positive relationships they enjoyed in the past, the leader embraced the idea.

The leader announced their retirement from the ministry, and the group threw a party to give thanks for their service, at which they were not asked to plan anything. The relationships that had been broken by the leader's continual feelings of displacement from a positive experience allowed the leader and the group to heal and realign their expectations of each other.

Resonance

Marking a movement in the group's missional identity from dissonance to resonance is perhaps the most recognizable transition, but also the most challenging to effect. When dissonance has expressed itself in the group's identity, or when the loss of trust through invalidation and delegitimation is extant, creating elements of resonance can bring renewal, but the conditions it sustains can be challenging. We know dissonance because it brings a recognizable sense of discomfort, but it is often hard to describe. We know when something doesn't feel right, but when challenged to name what might feel right, affected individuals may struggle to provide specifics.

Additionally, during a period of dissonance, creating conflict within the self or the group, there might be a loss of institutional or personal memory of what being in

resonance actually entailed. Parties involved in forging resonance for a community, and those experiencing it, often describe it as a feeling of “coming home to a place we have never been before.” In that context, the opportunity for dramatic change actually increases. Validation (or rather, revalidation) of a consensus on missional identity can be influenced by resonant experiences when other restoration, reconciliation, or replacement factors are concurrently offered.

Renewed Missional Identity: Recognizing and Reclaiming Trust

A Case Study: St. Peter’s Episcopal Church, Spotswood, NJ

The Parish

St. Peter’s Episcopal Church in Spotswood, New Jersey, is a historic parish of the Episcopal Diocese of New Jersey. As one of the original colonial-era churches established before the Revolutionary War, it predates the United States and the formation of the denomination in which it is currently held in trust. Historic records before 1756 do not exist, but visiting priests from Perth Amboy and New Brunswick note in their diaries that there was an established congregation in the town, which maintained a church building in the burying yard, now the site of the parish.

The parish’s official origin dates to its charter from King George III, signed and sealed by his hand on November 23, 1773. Also appended to the charter is the signature of the Governor of New Jersey at that time, William Franklin. The parish served the surrounding community for years, even amid rebellion, the disestablishment of the Church of England, and the creation of the Episcopal Church. Along with Christ Episcopal Church in New Brunswick, one of its rectors became the first Diocesan Bishop

of New Jersey. Members of the founding families still maintain their membership and support the parish.

Even with that continuity of service, the church has known trauma and triumph. The Revolutionary War and the War of 1812 divided the parish along lines of sympathy. Health crises in the early 19th century, such as a yellow fever epidemic, caused immense heartbreak. The Morgan/Outcalt human trafficking conspiracy involved established families of the parish, and the current church building stands as a result of contributions that were enabled by that dehumanizing chapter in the state's history.

At the same time, the parish also embodied some of the more progressive developments of the ecclesiastical history of the middle and late 19th century. A retired Confederate officer performed the first baptism of a woman of color in the area at St. Peter's. That woman, Nina, was a servant in a parish family and later one of the first people of color to be confirmed in a predominantly white congregation. Still, she was unable to be buried in the Church Yard and is instead interred at Christ Church in New Brunswick.

The Church building noted above was constructed from drawings obtained from Frank Wills, an architect of the Camden Society and a founding leader in bringing the Oxford Movement to the United States, through the formation of the Ecclesiological Society of New York. The building is the largest and one of the few remaining Carpenter-Gothic parochial churches in the United States of this scale, and one of the few parochial churches designed by Frank Wills before he died in 1840.

The parish was also among the first to embrace a “free church” model, shifting from subscription membership to free-will stewardship at the turn of the 20th century. The “new” church was expanded in that era and modernized with electricity and indoor plumbing in the rectory, the first structures in Spotswood to be modernized. That electrification led to one of the first major building crises since the 1830s, when, in 1928, a squirrel damaged a new organ and set the church ablaze. This calamity is still recounted as a turning point for the church in the conservation efforts of its mission and ministry.

During the middle and latter half of the 20th century, the parish grew moderately but remained a town-centered parish community. Generations of people from Spotswood, Monroe, East Brunswick, Old Bridge, and Helmetta grew up, lived near, and then passed on, knowing that St. Peter’s would be ready to answer their pastoral needs.

Many senior members recall the parish as it was in the 1970s and 1980s: a time when many youth participated in parish life, when community social gatherings were a regular occurrence, and when local schools held overflow classes due to the town's rapid growth. Spotswood remained a working-class town, but after a time of monochrome/monoculture, it began to experience a deepening sense of inclusion and diversity as distinct groups moved into town. It was also a time when several pastors and members with particular gifts for outreach and community service began to support people in need in the town and surrounding communities. Herein lies the beginning of a fracture in the parish’s missional and cultural identity.

As the parish grew, with membership increasing on Sunday mornings and through the Sunday School and youth ministry efforts of some parishioners, St. Peter’s also gained a reputation as a place of refuge and support for people in crisis or need. A group

of volunteers was given a small area to set up a Thrift Shop to sell donated goods to neighborhood residents. A Wednesday night social dinner began to reorganize into a soup kitchen, providing meals for anyone who arrived, free of charge. A small cache of donated groceries grew into a small food pantry at a local, subsidized senior living facility. Also, in the late 1990s and early 2000s, a group of parishioners, with the support of the priest and vestry, formed an independent 501 (c) (3) foundation to administer these growing programs and coordinate their efforts under one banner of service and advocacy for the poor.

These ministries grew, as did the parish's reputation, yet the Sunday-morning community was not fully aware of or connected to those efforts. This trend continued into the early 2000s, and with the rector's retirement and the onset of a period of transition, the conflicts began to strain the parish's leadership and to foster conflict between members of the Sunday-morning worship community and the various outreach ministries. All parties involved saw their needs for the occupation of space, and the narratives associated with those spaces as being in their own proprietary custody. Several groups of Sunday-morning parishioners also began to take an interest in the outreach efforts throughout the week. Small committees were formed, without the outreach leaders' awareness or consent, to improve efficiency in those ministries and correct perceived errors by the parish leadership.

With the incumbent rector's retirement, the parish entered a period of transition. For nearly two years, a part-time interim rector was engaged to see the parish leadership through the search and calling process. Many of the conflicts that arose before the transition were exacerbated by the interim leadership's perceived lack of long-term

investment. In addition to those conflicts, many in the parish expressed concerns that the search might bring someone to the pulpit who did not meet their expectations. Some members were uncomfortable with the idea of calling a priest who was a woman, or who expressed a sexual preference or gender identity that made them uncomfortable.

The Rector

The search for the 36th rector of St. Peter's involved the wider judicatory system, in the persons of the Bishop and the Canon for Transition Ministries. Also, the former 34th rector of St. Peter's, who was serving the Diocese as the Canon to the Ordinary (COO equivalent), played a secondary role. The search concluded with the election, call, and installation of the author. As a senior priest of the wider church and the diocese, this call was seen by the leadership as a deliberate choice to embrace a pastoral leader who could guide the parish through its conflicts and help it to find a more unified mission identity, even as the parish's culture was in flux.

The Challenges

The parish, at the time of the call of the 36th rector, was dealing with the above-mentioned issues and deferred maintenance. Additionally, the parish was struggling with financial issues stemming from miscommunication among the stewardship and administrative financial officers, the vestry/board leadership, and the clergy. The new rector was presented with those issues upon taking the pulpit and was also asked to address conflicts among the various Sunday-morning and outreach factions.

In the first months of the new call, the rector worked closely with the Church's leadership to build relationships around shared goals and improve communication. It

became apparent that unless deeper, more sustained efforts were made to shift the parish's cultural structures, the community's missional identity would remain invalidated and lack a clear, broad consensus. Work was undertaken immediately to address the deferred maintenance and to clarify the roles and responsibilities of the financial ministry leaders. Also, the groups leading the various streamlining and improvement ministries were asked to step back, giving the new rector more time to get up to speed on the issues. The leaders of the outreach ministries also met with the Rector and board representatives to clarify the proper ways to offer feedback and request assistance. In conversations with various members of the parish's ministries, the rector learned that many volunteer roles were held by individuals recruited by leaders to perpetuate those leaders' practices, attitudes, and assumptions. Everything from preparing coffee to presenting the offerings during worship was reserved for hand-selected, group-approved members, without consultation with the parish's administrative or pastoral leadership.

The Crisis

Those efforts to build unity in missional identity were upset in the second year of the new rector's call when a tropical storm wreaked havoc on the church's buildings and grounds. Tropical Storm Irene caused an epochal flood in the region and in the parish. Parishioners and neighbors around the church were deeply affected by the flooding, with several households losing their homes and many members having their lives disrupted. Additionally, flooding on the church's property destroyed the Sunday School and Youth Ministry, damaged much of the Parish Hall infrastructure, threatened the historic church building, and displaced most of the parish's outreach ministries.

An example of the profound and traumatic losses caused by the flood was the destruction of a collection of handprints from several generations of church members, made over 10 years earlier during a Sunday School renovation. Many of those younger members had since grown up and moved away from the church. Other older members had passed away, leaving their marks on the wall as reminders of their absence. Due to the destruction, those artifacts could not be salvaged. Being dislocated from that space meant more than the Sunday School being displaced from its venue. The church had lost a location to focus on its collective memory.

Restoring the Sunday School required complete demolition and rebuilding of the space. In addition, the space itself needed to be better organized to accommodate the church's pressing needs. Relocation to the renovated areas meant that the dislocated groups and members of the church had to come to terms with spaces that had once been their Sunday School of memory but were no longer. To relocate to that new space, the church and its members had to form a new sense of themselves, in continuity with a past that was no longer externally accessible. As well, they also had to learn how to relocate their bodies, their expectations, and their basic relationships to the space and each other by forging a new consensus of naming the space as their Sunday School while at the same time allowing that new space to redefine their consensus on how they would offer formation going into the future.

Recovery from the flooding was difficult, compounded by the parish's lack of insurance coverage for the event. With their finances already under strain, the added disruption of a lack of resources to rebuild the spaces in the buildings for ministry felt insurmountable. The challenges posed by the new rector's arrival were further strained by

tensions and conflicts across the various ministries, as well as by the administration of the parish's resources amid perceived scarcity.

The leadership group was responsible for managing the parish at a detailed level, assessing each administrative decision through group discernment, and requiring their approval and validation before execution. This left the parish's staff feeling frustrated. Management policy required three competing bids for every issue. After receiving three bids, the staff was forced to wait for a response from the board, which would usually then assign volunteers to do the work to reduce costs. After some time under this policy, local contractors began refusing to submit bids for work. The staff felt poorly used, and the Board became critical, saying they were not doing their jobs well.

Rebuilding the damaged areas of the church's campus and leading the groups that had held authority in the past to new ways of working together and with outside contractors was challenging. The new rector was also working with senior leaders and officers in the parish and the judicatory to bring the parish's administrative practices back into clearer alignment with the denomination's policies around finances, stewardship, and governance.

The accumulation of these factors led to a deepening conflict among members of the parish, the development corporation's leadership, the rector, and members of the vestry and board who were not part of the leading group's support cadre. After several months and in the wake of the building projects, the leading group felt that the new rector and leadership emerging from the pews, along with a renewed focus on incorporating diverse opinions from outside their sphere of control, were causing a loss of cultural and missional identity. The conflict culminated in an attempted coup during a parish annual

meeting, at which two opposing slates of candidates were presented for election to the Vestry, the parish's governing board. The ensuing years saw a series of engagements between the rector and successive lay leadership officers to address and work through the parish's conflicts and renew both its missional and cultural identity.

The Conflict

The attempted coup during the parish's annual meeting offered a dramatic illustration of the cumulative issues and the loss of coherence in the voices claiming authority in the parish. That moment illustrated and made public the widening rift between the parish's leading social group and the increasingly diverse and changing composition of its canonical leadership. One of the realizations that took root during this season of conflict in the parish centers on the illustrations above. First, there was a breakdown in trust between the parties given authority in the parish. Second, with that breakdown in trust, there was a concurrent loss of legitimation among the lay and ordained leadership due to disagreement over their roles and their ability to act in a manner deemed propitious. Finally, there was a breakdown in the leadership group's ability to forge and maintain consensus in its discernment and decision-making processes. This degradation led to a loss of validation of the parish leadership's ability to manage the parish and support the pastor coherently.

The conflict over space and the role of individuals filling roles of leadership and service in those spaces fostered a sense of disruption in the members of the parish affected by the conflicts around the Thrift Shop (and the revitalization committee), the stubborn resolve of the feeding ministries to claim space that the Sunday-morning group saw as their own, and the desire of the Sunday School to keep outside groups from

impinging on their classroom space and storage. Individuals and groups felt that others were seeking to force their way, their perspective, or their ownership onto territories and roles that had originally been inviolable.

With flooding and physical damage to spaces in the parish hall and across the wider campus, groups were displaced from their original spaces. They not only lost access to those spaces. They were also deprived of the space they had known and become accustomed to over the decades. Because of conflicts in social and ministry leadership, many individuals in the parish felt either threatened that their roles were being taken from them or forced into positions they found untenable or unacceptable to their previous assumptions and understanding. This growing sense of displacement made many feel unwelcome in spaces and roles in the church that had been theirs only briefly before the new pastorate began.

After the repairs and the resolution of many of the recently discovered deferred maintenance issues, the return to vacated spaces still left many with a sense of dislocation. During the intense first years of this new pastorate, many new members had joined, new faces had been welcomed into leadership, and the ministries themselves had undergone dramatic changes to adapt to a swiftly evolving environment. This sense of transformation into the basic ways people had inhabited their perceived roles and the spaces they knew well fostered a sense of dislocation. Even when those changes were ultimately seen as favorable, there was a lingering sense of nostalgia for the days before the flood, and before the rector's arrival.

Finally, amid these changes, shifts in the community's population around the church revealed a widening gap between the community's history and the region's

demographic trends. There was a loss of many working-class job opportunities as local factories closed in favor of warehouse, residential, and commercial redevelopment. Broadening racial and social diversity brought demands for a more multicultural worship style, along with social changes in the diocese and surrounding communities that encouraged the parish to become more welcoming and affirming of people of diverse backgrounds, including those with diverse gender identities and sexualities. Many long-time members of the parish felt that their social mores were no longer being affirmed in the parish's increasingly diverse perspectives. This growing sense of dissonance left many feeling that the church, the diocese, and the clerical leadership had abandoned traditional church values and theology.

Resolution and Renewal

After the coup attempt, it became apparent that the majority of the parish's membership and its ministries desired a shift in practice and a focus on missional identity and cultural renewal. Each of the proposed candidates from the groups that had struggled with the conflicts and changes of the first years of the new pastorate was defeated during the annual parish meeting's election of new officers. While the immediate crisis had been addressed, the entering leadership and the rector did not assume that all was well or copacetic in the deeper structures of relationships in the parish and its ministries.

It was apparent that the aggregated effects of conflict and stress exceeded the assumed, acceptable limits of tolerance. As noted above, the experiences of individuals and groups facing disruption, displacement, dislocation, and dissonance spanned many concentric, radial groups, each centered on their unique, often incongruous assumptions about the parish's identity and mission. Some of those elements were cumulative from

previous pastorates and seasons of transition. Others were unique to the ways the new rector and members had formed relationships (both conflicted and aligned). Thus, we can see that the medium of trust in the essentially important relationship among the pastor, lay leadership, and the lay membership of the parish was compromised by both erosive and corrosive conditions in the primary conduits of trust that formed and supported the perceived legitimacy of the rector in their role. In the ways the leadership was able to form, express, and defend their consensus in the administration of the parish's concerns, both at the granular (day-to-day administration) and macro-missional (the sense of vision being linked to mission) levels in the wider parish community.

A period of communal discernment about the nature of recovery from the flooding helped many members find a way to experience restoration amid dislocation. Being able to mourn the loss of the Sunday School and Youth Ministry space and its furnishings helped many let go of the expectation that returning to a renovated space would allow them to feel they were entering a space more conducive to the present needs of the church's formation ministries. One of the great levers of support in that transition was the creation of workdays that allowed people to contribute their labor to the shared effort. The hands on the walls were gone, but many members, old and new, were able to take a hand in restoring what was lost.

At the same time, the efforts to refresh the organizational work around the thrift store struck a deeper resonance with the routines in the parish hall regarding how and when space was used. A focused set of meetings with the revitalization committee and long-term volunteers, presided over by the rector and a lay-elected leader, established ground rules to help members feel heard and ensure their opinions and ideas are given

equal weight and fair consideration. With members of the revitalization committee invited to join the volunteer group and new volunteers recruited from both the parish and the wider community, the sense of building positive, trusting relationships grew, creating a broader foundation of support for sustaining changes to their old management systems. Instead of feeling displaced, the ministry members discovered new ways to see their ministries as having impact and import within the parish's missional identity.

Amid these efforts to forge a sense of renewal through reconciliation, resonance, and restoration among the various groups and individuals engaged in these conflicts, several dramatic developments strained the already strained relationships between the rector, the lay leadership, and groups of more traditionally and conservatively minded members. As the Episcopal Church was coming to terms with the questions of sexuality and gender identity, as well as encouraging parishes to be more open and welcoming to the growing diversity of blessing these relationships in the church, new members of the parish who were members of the LGBTQIA+ community asked to be welcomed to the baptismal font and to the altar. That new, radical position of inclusion fostered, in some, a sense of displacement and an increasing sense of dissonance with the polity of the parish, the wider diocese, and the denomination.

The new pastor then preached a series of sermons on the inclusive nature of their faith and of the liberal use of space to accommodate multiple ministries that serve their mission identity. At the same time, the leadership reviewed the church's mission and vision statements and found them complicated and confusing, lacking clarity about who is welcome and who is not as the church seeks to grow. As the sermons addressed the Sunday-morning community, the outreach leaders focused on sharing their stories about

the work they did both inside and outside the parish. In addition, a new mission statement has been adopted to clarify that all are welcome at this church.

After several years of concerted effort, the dissonance between the layers of expectations between the various groups in the parish began to break down. A new sense of the parish, constructed from radiant, interdependent, and concentric circles of relationships, sought to supplant a set of interactions that had kept the various groups isolated and at odds with one another. This sense of missional identity and cultural renewal has served to emphasize the previous assumptions and projections that have interlaced throughout St. Peter's history by reaffirming its sense of itself as an intimate and welcoming body gathered in worship. It also supports the expectations of the wider community that St. Peter's continues to build upon its reputation as a church that welcomes all in need without being exclusionary in service, worship, or fellowship.

Moving into a Season of Resurrection

Reestablishing Mission Identity

Every parish that undertakes a concerted and clear focus on reviewing and renewing its missional and cultural identity faces distinct challenges. At the foundational level of its own sense of itself and its role in the surrounding social environment, the parish must be willing to see itself as others do, even if that means realizing there is a lack of alignment between its own sense of itself and its interior narratives when compared to those without its immediate membership. In addition to that challenge, there is a high likelihood that the resolve to address those issues critically is arising at a time of heightened anxiety or conflict. Changes in leadership, governance structure, or dramatic shifts in the group's capacity to absorb rapid changes in practice, venue, or narrative

assumptions often impose a stultifying loss of the group's capacity to imagine and innovate beyond its routinized patterns of behavior and interactions.

If one also adds external events to that work, such as a natural disaster or a dramatic, impactful social conflict, then the leadership's ability to convince members and each other of their legitimate role in directing change is compromised. Also, the group's ability to form consensus on novel social processes that lead to validated, considered, theologically grounded responses is delayed, if not rendered inert.

Taking on the challenging path to missional identity and cultural renewal allows a church to use the tools afforded by social science and pastoral theology to form a realistic analysis of its current structures, social assumptions, and pastoral expectations. They can address deficits or sufficiencies of trust extant in their interactions and relationships. They can also begin to form a structure focused on the essential needs of their social objects (legitimated leaders) and practices (validated processes of service, worship, and social gathering).

Mapping Cultural Identity

Forming coherent visual representations of their cultural identity is a vital part of these exercises. By offering cogent, shared images of their social and cultural identity, a church can begin to see that construct as pliant, dynamic, and adaptive over time. They are also able to discern continuities and supportive historical evidence that will help them clarify that their identity is not a novel construct, but something that has developed and evolved within an interdependent and reliable set of relationships that are inherent to their own existence and, at the same time, able to link them dynamically to their context.

There are many ways for a group to forge a model that visually represents their current perception of the missional and cultural identity. As those models are formed, care should be taken to encourage them to see that their own interior narrative is the dominant and driving agent of their resolve to be the Body of Christ in their context. That agency does not exist in a vacuum. That map of identity also needs to be placed in context. There are groups within that parish or church community that wield profound influence over the community's narrative. Often, those groups or individuals maintain influence over several cycles of church membership. There are also bodies within the church that are vested (authorized and endorsed), with canonical or judicatory authority. These might lack the social sway of a historical group, but they are equally responsible for shaping the parish's internal narratives.

Outside groups in the wider community can also offer a profound influence on the formation and curation of a parish's identity.²⁴ The reputation of the church matters because the same conduits of trust that exist among parish members also shape how the church is perceived in the wider community. Outside groups that work closely with the church can also proffer externally held narratives that can influence, and even determine, how the church sees its impact and role in its mission to serve those around it.

²⁴ Changes in the activities of the organization may improve transactions with stakeholders leading to more positive outcomes. However, changes may lead to transactions that could have negative or mixed impacts on stakeholders who are directly interacting with the organization. The introduction of externalities could also lead to unintended consequences and spillover effects that impact stakeholders who are not a direct party to the transaction. Franklin, *Stakeholder Engagement*, 27.

One way to envision this mapping of a missional and cultural identity is this bubble map, using groups, networks, narratives (both interior and exterior) to form a visual representation of that construct, and to afford the leadership group of the church to begin to see that structure as something outside of themselves and as mutable to their redesign. See

the figure here:

The creation of

that map of its

cultural and

missional

identity will

enable a



church's leadership to see itself as dynamic, mutable, and adaptive over time.²⁵ Often, groups with a deep history in challenging, transformative contexts will struggle to experiment with changes in practice or structure. When the familiar and expected become

²⁵ The work of creating a space in which new and honest speech can flow in a community is theologically crucial. Researching religious practices will likely bring many new voices and versions of peoples' stories into your hearing. Moschella, *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice*, 176.

The uses of cultural diversity, of its study, its description, its analysis, and its comprehension, lie less along the lines of sorting ourselves out from others and other from ourselves so as to defend group integrity and sustain group loyalty than along the lines of defining the terrain reason must cross if its modest rewards are to be reached and realized. Geertz, *Available Light*, 83.

unreliable or unrecognizable, forging visual representations that are afforded greater flexibility for innovation, experimentation, or renovation.

Forging Consensus

At the core of a viable pastoral theology of trust, and for that theology to invigorate a parish's ability to renew and revitalize its missional and cultural identity, the practice and skills of forging consensus as a group are essential. Social science underscores the need for leaders to assert legitimacy in their roles of authority across pastoral, liturgical, and administrative functions. That requires clarity of authorization, endorsement, and propriety.²⁶ If a leader lacks those elements in articulating their role in the community, trust will erode or corrode over time. That loss will increase the likelihood of the manifestation of one or more of the four core contributors to conflict in the parish: dislocation, displacement, disruption, or dissonance.

By addressing the root causes of those contributors, the leader might assume the conflict has been resolved. However, taking into account the social theories of legitimation, recovery will also need to address the losses incurred by the loss of that same legitimation.²⁷ Restoring their ability to be seen as the authorized, endorsed, and

²⁶ The most important thing to keep in mind when presenting any new idea to a congregation is that each member lives with her or his own faith paradigm. Gerald Skillicorn, *Revisiting Pentecost* (Kindle Direct Publishing, 2021), 108.

²⁷ On the other hand, however, information on endorsement and authorization is important in estimating success and the likelihood of forming a coalition and appealing to a higher authority because the manager's superiors may be perceived as less strongly constrained to redistribute salary raises. Cathryn Johnson and Rebecca Ford, "Dependence Power, Legitimacy, and Tactical Choice," *Social Psychology Quarterly* 59, no. 2 (1996): 126–39, JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2787047>.

propitious leader of a community will allow them to direct and support the community's long-term forging of consensus on action and identity.²⁸ For a leader seeking to offer a legitimized role in a community, or for one seeking to restore it, the ability to forge reconciliation, restoration, relationships, and resonance provides a pathway toward a functional, consensual model of shared leadership in the church.

Sustaining Welcome: Validating Consensus of Cultural Narrative

The primary experience of the exercise that St. Peter's has worked through and is offered in this thesis is that a clear emphasis on forging and finding validation in a missional and cultural identity enables a community of faith to adapt to a rapidly changing and evolving social context. Through clear, identifiable processes, a deep and sustainable transformation of cultural identity has resulted in continual, adaptive innovation in cultural practices. Often, in either results-based or best-practices-based efforts in congregational development, attempts to alter identity through practice struggle to find a footing for the longer-term support of the community and its connected outside groups.

Forming a coherent, validated cultural narrative is more than just coming to an agreed-upon narrative. We cannot just tell ourselves a story about who we would become without linking it faithfully to a rooted cultural identity grounded in both the church's material and aspirational history. Too often, those narratives become impositional. Even

²⁸ A key implication of their approach is that even if a subordinate privately disagrees with a superordinate's action, the subordinate is more likely to comply with that action if the superordinate is endorsed and authorized. Johnson and Ford, "Dependence Power, Legitimacy, and Tactical Choice."

with the best intentions, if the desired outcomes exceed the constituents' capacity, the effort will struggle to secure adequate validation. In addition, the leader attempting to impose those standards could see their legitimated role and position erode.

For St. Peter's, after a great deal of work on seeking alignment of expectations with their internal and external narratives, and with an effort to refine and respect their processes of achieving validation within their leaders' legitimated roles, the parish was able to resolve the previous seasons in which disruption, displacement, dislocation and dissonance sowed tares among the wheat of their missional renewal efforts. The focus on forming a missional identity centered around the concept of "Welcome Home" provided the cultural context to see their efforts to align every aspect of their congregation's activities and their valuation of relationships both within and without the parochial bounds as one of essential arrival, acceptance, desire for relationship, and ultimately the continual, vibrant transformation of the parish, embraced by all as unfolding in real time (over and against being codified in the past and held in continuity).

Noting Arrivals and Departures from the Community

Among the more challenging aspects of a pastoral theology of trust is embracing the reality that while the church's institutional existence expresses continuity over time, its membership fluctuates dramatically. The increasingly rapid turn over among local church members forces the necessity of each leadership point being able to accept the flux and mutability of the body's constitution while at the same time working with the ever-changing social construct to preserve their legitimation of the church's social objects (pastoral and temporal leadership) and validation (the social processes whereby the

leadership can both facilitate work to articulate the narrative of the parish and support the membership in bringing that narrative to material effect.

St. Peter's, as a social object in the community, affords it an example of both continuity and adaptation of service in place. The community has continuously used the church campus since the early 18th century. The churchyard is a burial site, ensconcing the membership of the past with physical memorials to their lives and ministries. At the same time, the parish's present-day services illustrate how a person can arrive on campus almost every day of the week and encounter a vibrant, engaged community of practice.

While this dynamic interplay between past and present is integral to the formation and maintenance of a missional and cultural identity, the ability to nurture that narrative continues to flow through a multitude of transient hands. Every member of the parish, even those whose families have been members for several hundred years, understands that we are only passing through this space, telling these stories to hand them on to others when they arrive. Contingent on this social process of transference, our task is not to concretize the parish's narrative, but to remind ourselves that history is not complete. We are always challenged to hold it only for a time, then release it to others, until the time comes when we will no longer see those we recognize in our midst. Rather, that new creation will be the true face of the parish's culture.

Essential to this effort is the willingness of the parish's leadership and membership to recognize that conflict can present an opportunity to renew our missional and cultural identity. By focusing on healthy, spiritual relationships, we can connect effectively in service. By clearly defining who we site groups and individuals in spaces conducive to missional activities, we affirm that relocating those groups and restoring

their ability to find validation in their work supports healing and the affirmation of their connection to the culture of the parish. Finally, that sense of connection and renewal enables a dynamic set of interactions that forge and qualify the resonance individuals and groups feel when their participation in the life of the church aligns with that evolving missional and cultural identity.

“We Are Where We Have Been”: Recounting Loss and Trauma

With a fully articulated pastoral theology of trust and using the social science tools of legitimation and validation, we can discern the parish in a fully formed narrative that emphasizes its ability to articulate and sustain a missional identity in its cultural context over time and through succeeding generations. The ability to embrace and sustain a sense of being connected to the present, of valuing the past, and at the same time trusting the leadership to guide the community in discerning how to become the church in the years to form the crux of a vibrant, dynamic, and mutable missional identity for a parish that sees itself as contributory and engaged in its context.

When a transient community can form and validate a sense of identity in its faith and missional context, then a clear sense of its identity and the balance of that identity's internal and external narratives form a supportive network. That network is then able to evaluate, effectively critique, and contribute to a leader's ability to maintain legitimation over time. We ultimately arrive at a point where legitimation guides the leader toward deeper, perhaps more challenging efforts to grow the parish's missional and cultural identity beyond its current bounds.

The opportunity presented by this project sets the stage for two possible developments. The first is a deeper analysis of the current literature on trust as a

theological construct. By delving deeper into the ways both historic models of trust in human communities has been expressed and articulated, we can further use those supports to encourage our leadership to see their legitimation as being drawn from and supported from a positive and engaged reflection with their constituencies on how that trust in their legitimation, and their mutual forging of a validated consensus over time might be renewable. The second opportunity is to refresh the study of congregational development as a set of processes offered in this thesis, which grounds parochial conflict not in instigating or contributing factors affecting individual stakeholders. Still, rather, they are a series of successive losses in legitimation and validation, in either the social objects of their leaders or the social processes of their cultural and missional constructs. With that, we move beyond best practices and into a deeper realm of observation of the culture of the parish, mutual consensus on the missional identity of the group, and then constructive discernment on how that group can forge a renewal of its identity and practices to better conform their efforts to positive effect in the communities they serve while at the same time accentuating their sense of continuity and connection to their deeper, shared narratives which have sustained their identity over time.

As this set of conclusions presents a community of faith and its legitimated leadership with some challenging work, it should be noted that if a group can forge consensus on a missional and cultural identity, come to consensus on how that identity has changed over time and how they, too, have changed over time, then we have an opportunity to work with them to renew those aspirations of the group to adapt to a rapidly changing context while at the same time supporting a linked connection to the bedrock assumptions that chartered their existence upon their founding. It gives us a way

to affirm their religious and practical identity as a culture that is not static but vibrant and adaptive. Its mutability becomes its continuity as it persists in one place over successive generations.

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