

Discernment and Leadership for the Missional Church:  
Missional Decision-Making and the Diocese of Niagara

by

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A Paper

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## **Introduction**

I now have completed three years of the Congregational Mission and Leadership Doctor of Ministry program at Luther Seminary and have found what I have learned very helpful in thinking my way through the new challenges and changing habits for leadership in today's church.

Church leaders like myself were often trained to be visionary leaders and quick decision-makers who could point people in the direction in which they should go. Our Anglican tradition tended to reinforce a hierarchal understanding of leadership that also reflected a hierarchal power dynamic.

The landscape has dramatically changed and I am grateful for that. Missional leaders now understand that their task is to hold the space open so that people can participate in processes of discernment.

Yet our old habits die hard. People in our congregations often still look to those in leadership, and especially their clergy (and perhaps most of all their bishop!) to tell them what to do. Parishioners can sometimes be disappointed when we don't provide them with the answers that they seek, and that can have the unfortunate result of us our losing the influence we need to lead. At moments such as these missional leaders call people to missional discernment rather than providing answers and missional leaders know that they don't have the answers apart from such discernment.

Since recently becoming a member of synod council I have been thinking about the issues surrounding the church and its property. In particular I've been thinking about

the issues in Guelph concerning the former St. Matthias site, as well as our decision-making concerning development of property in the cathedral precincts. In our meetings I have twice heard Bishop Michael say something to the effect that we need a fuller process or framework for thinking about these issues.<sup>1</sup> This paper is meant as a humble contribution towards forming such a process.

### **Method and Discernment**

It is important to say a few things concerning a theoretical framework for the changes in the way that missional leaders approach discernment and in the ways that we understand the discernment process today in light of the hermeneutical turn of postmodernity.

In the late 20<sup>th</sup> century the Enlightenment underpinnings of the idea that truth could only be known objectively through, for example, the scientific method, were shaken by the postmodern shift which insisted that if truth is to be known, it is to be known only perspectivally. Because of this, there has been a shift from an emphasis on epistemology (how do we know) to an emphasis on hermeneutics (how do we interpret both the *how* and *what* of our encounters).

If knowing is perspectival, then discernment must necessarily require a multi-perspectival approach. Discernment must involve listening to multiple voices and allowing those voices to help us reflect upon our own perspectives.

While Enlightenment epistemologies tended to reject scripture and the work of the Holy Spirit because they did not fit within an objective-scientific paradigm, postmodernity admits such narratives, even if with some suspicion, as perspectives in

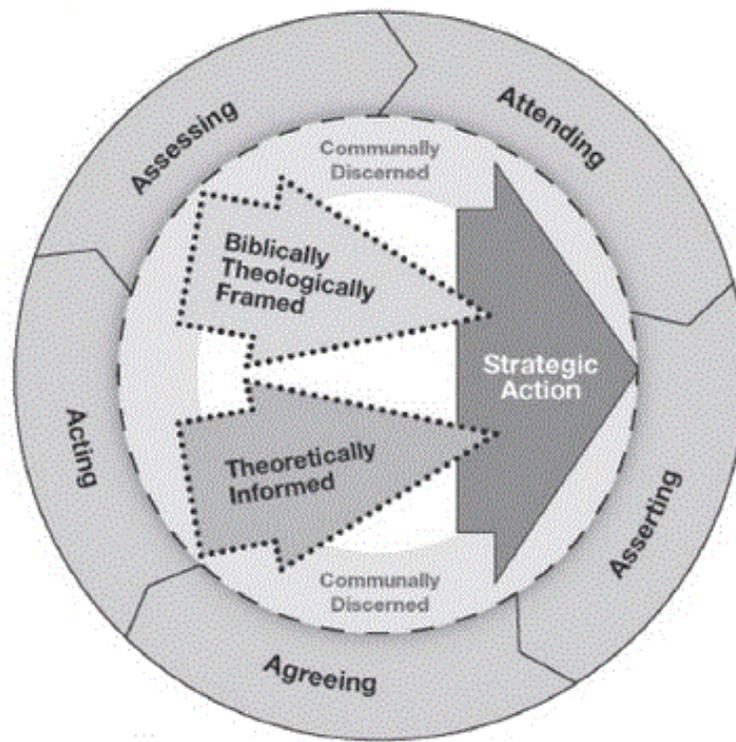
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<sup>1</sup> My apologies if I have misrepresented comments.

their own right. Within postmodern approaches it is perfectly acceptable for Christians to approach issues with a biblical-theological pre-understanding and with an openness to the Holy Spirit. What might a multi-perspectival approach to missional discernment look like? I would like to describe one such model that I have found helpful that has been proposed by my thesis advisor, Craig Van Gelder.

### A Proposed Model

Van Gelder proposes an approach for approach for “communally discerned, theologically framed, theoretically informed, strategic action,” that involves “attending, asserting, agreeing, acting and assessing.”<sup>2</sup>



**Figure 1.** Craig Van Gelder’s Missional Hermeneutic.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Craig Van Gelder, “The Hermeneutics of Leading in Mission,” *Journal of Religious Leadership* 3, no. 1 and 2, Spring 2004 and Fall 2004 (2004): 150-66.

## Communally Discerned

Communal discernment brings together multiple perspectives. Involved would be not only those who are the official deciders or proposers, but stake-holders of all sorts. Multiple voices are invited to the table and the question is asked regarding who is not at the table and perhaps unable to be at the table.

Communal discernment is informed and framed by a missional ecclesiology: that is an understanding of the role of the church in engaging in the *missio Dei*. In the case of the Diocese of Niagara our *Diocesan Vision* is a particular articulation of this. Communal discernment takes on this missional view as part of its pre-understanding. Communal discernment also takes seriously the local context, the needs of the neighbourhood and the wider community.

Communal discernment seeks to avoid the win/lose solutions that are too often part of power games that get played out in human arenas like the church and instead seeks to come to a shared understanding and commitment for moving forward.

## Biblically and Theologically Framed

Engagement with—and knowledge of—scripture and its interpretation over time is key to discernment that is biblically and theologically framed. Congregations or synods that do this work need to have more than a passing familiarity with scripture. Because we come to the discernment process as Christians, we begin with a pre-understanding which is different from those who do not share this perspective.

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<sup>3</sup> Craig Van Gelder, *The Ministry of the Missional Church: A Community Led by the Spirit*, Kindle ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007).

A faith community's confessions (or, especially for Anglicans, our liturgy<sup>4</sup>) and the historic creeds of the church may also provide helpful summaries of the biblical narrative that shapes the church's theology. The precise meaning and implication of each detail of this biblical-theological framework may not be entirely fixed and uncontested, (our biblical-theological understandings develop over time) yet the ongoing conversation of the community (*communally discerned*) will always be part of this biblical and theological framing and ensures that God remains part of the conversation.

In any process of discernment we would want to ask what biblical narratives might shed light on the situation, or what theological concepts might frame our conversation.

#### Theoretically Informed

Van Gelder argues, "Leading in mission from a hermeneutical perspective within a particular context cannot be adequately addressed without giving attention to the insights and contributions from the social sciences."<sup>5</sup> More than the communally discerned, biblically and theologically framed information perspective is needed. Decisions should also be theoretically informed.

Christians can find support for taking on learning from the social sciences within their biblical and theological framework. Christians believe that God is at work in the world to heal, restore and bring the world into right relationship with God's self. The

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<sup>4</sup> While Anglicans are not part of a confessional church and hold no confessions beyond the historic creeds, the principle of *lex orandi, lex credendi* applies. In the Anglican tradition the liturgy itself functions as a kind of "confession" so that perhaps we can say, *lex orandi, lex credendi, lex missionem*. Our baptismal liturgy, for example, says a great deal about our understanding of mission. Other resources include "The Five Marks of Mission of the Anglican Communion."

<sup>5</sup> Van Gelder, "The Hermeneutics of Leading in Mission," 158.

vision for this restored state of affairs is referred to in the biblical narrative as “the kingdom” or “reign of God.” Christians seek to partner with God in God’s work in the world (*missio Dei*). Christians also tend to believe that although their knowledge of the world and of the kingdom of God is limited and perspectival, the world can be truly known, which makes information to be gained from the social sciences useful.<sup>6</sup> The social sciences have the benefit of bringing more information to the table.

If the church’s voice and its authoritative texts are to be viewed by others with suspicion, the added perspective of social science research lends a further layer of credibility. Moreover, many methods that can be employed in social science research can enhance the *communally discerned* element of the process. Both qualitative and quantitative research can pull together the views of people in the community and therefore make them part of the process and conversation that a small group of decision-makers might never have heard from. Social science research, as part of a discernment process, has the potential to change the power dynamic.

### Strategic Action

The purpose in all of this is strategic action. Discernment is more than knowledge; it is a process that leads to action that is the result of the choice that is made. In the case of the missional church, the church is seeking to discern what action might best conform to its partnership with God in the *missio Dei*. Strategic action is more, however, than the outcome of a process, it is part of the process also, as it provides the opportunity to observe how the action functions. Within the strategic action itself there is a new opportunity to communally discern. The cycle continues. This cycle of attending,

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

asserting, agreeing, acting and assessing allows the church to continue to grow in its partnership with God in the *missio Dei*.

### **Case Studies**

We might consider what such a process of discernment might bring to decisions concerning the sale of the former St. Matthias church property or the proposed cathedral development. The former may already be decided and the second in very nearly decided.

#### Case Study: Communal Discernment

#### **Communal Discernment and the Proposed Cathedral Project**

The task force that has worked on the cathedral project has done an admirable job tackling the complex issues surrounding the possibilities for development and the task that they were given around ensuring the future viability of the cathedral's ministry and of the synod office and resource centre's requirements on a going forward basis.

One of the first steps of communal discernment might have to do with clarity around the question. It is worth noting that the genesis of this project involved a particular goal that had to do with viability of the cathedral and synod resource centre. The particular discernment question here is not an open-ended question about what should be done with the cathedral precincts. It is a particular question about the possibilities of creating revenue for future sustainability. Clarity of the question is important. Much of the conversation that took place at our recent clergy day assumed that all options could receive equal consideration. There was confusion, for example, about why a project with affordable housing did not receive more attention. The answer, that

affordable housing cannot create enough of a revenue stream, only makes sense if the specific question about looking for financial sustainability is remembered.

The task force and clergy day considered how the proposed project fit with the Diocesan Vision. The Diocesan Vision is a statement that summarizes a great deal about our missional identity as a diocesan family and as such should always be part of our communal discernment. The fact is, however, that if we are considering first our diocesan vision, we might not come up with this particular project proposal. The project proposal, in as much as it will allow for the future viability and sustainability of the cathedral and diocesan resource centre, will support the diocesan vision. Rather than asking if the proposed project accords with the diocesan vision, the proponents of this project may be better advised to tell the story of how the future viability and sustainability of the cathedral and diocesan resource centre will support the vision.

### **Communal Discernment and Disposal of Church Property**

A great deal of communal discernment takes place with the closing and deconsecration of a parish church. For the most part, however, these discussions are internal to the parish and synod structures. Prior to disestablishment neighbourhood relationships have sometimes disappeared along with parish mission in the neighbourhood. As has become clear in the St. Matthias situation, however, the neighbourhood may still have ideas about its own needs and the potential use of the property. While *communal discernment* would not suggest that neighbours should have the deciding vote regarding the future of the property, a process of communal discernment might include neighbours in the discussion. Communal discernment aims at having all voices heard and all perspectives examined, at “drawing the circle wide.”

### Case Study: Biblically and Theologically Framed

Throughout the conversations that I have been part of at synod council and among the clergy and lay-workers of the diocese, it has not been clear to me what biblical-theological framework we are working from in our discussion about church property. To be fair, the diocesan vision is always present and that vision is both biblically and theologically informed. That said, however, I believe that other important theological questions remains unexplored and unanswered.

What does the “ownership” (theoretical concept) of property by the synod mean from a biblical and theological perspective? The powers of the *market* and the *state* are ready with the answer that property is a commodity to be bought and sold at a profit. How might a biblical view challenge dominant cultural view that seeks to commodify all things? The scriptures of the Old Testament have much to say about people’s relationship to the land. What is our theology of place? What does it mean when over the years a parish set in a particular neighbourhood might say, “this is your church”? What meaning do we place on the intentions of founders and benefactors whose connection with place was so strong that sometimes they used these places to bury their dead? How does a theology of generous stewardship, of abundance over scarcity, inform our decisions? When our church leaves a neighbourhood are we shaking the dust off our feet in testimony against them (Luke 10:11-12)? Or if some other narrative, which one? What is our continuing ministry and calling in a neighbourhood? What is our theology of *parish* and of *neighbourhood* and *neighbourliness*?

### Case Study: Theoretically Informed

A great number of theoretical lens are available to the synod in making decisions about its property. It is clear that we have taken advantage of the opportunity to learn from experts in the fields of real estate and building development. It is less clear that we have consulted research into our neighbourhoods by other experts or necessarily conducted our own research.

There are many good things happening in downtown Hamilton and the proposed cathedral development is positioned to gain advantage by participating in the wave of development happening in the Jamesville area. Last summer I conducted my own research that looked at the social capital coming out of the Casi-No movement.<sup>7</sup> Universally the respondents interviewed asked, “If the Casi-No Movement saved our downtown neighbourhoods, what did it save them for?” The people that I interviewed were happy that good things were happening downtown but asking if those good things would be available only to those with capital interest? They were concerned that, as people with capital interest moved to participate in the gentrification of the neighbourhood, those unable to participate in and benefit from these changes (i.e., the poor), would be displaced. There was concern that benefits of gentrification would be available only to the rich and middle-class and that their gain would, in fact, be on the backs of the poor. Respondents also talked about the role that the church could play in working towards *the common good* (biblical-theological concept).<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> David J. Anderson, “The Common Good in Hamilton’s Downtown Neighborhoods: Possibilities for Partnerships Arising from Social Capital and the “Casi No Movement”” (unpublished essay, Luther Seminary, St. Paul, MN, 2014).

<sup>8</sup> I argue that from a biblical-theological perspective *the common good* is a key feature of the reign of God. One of the main features of *the common good* is that it is “common”, meaning it is available to all. See Walter Brueggemann, *Journey to the Common Good*, Kindle ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John

It might be argued that fears of those whom I interviewed are unfounded. Perhaps the poor will not be displaced. Perhaps gentrification can be managed in a way that it promotes the common good. These are questions that can be pursued with a theoretically informed approach.

### Case Study: Strategic Action

As I have stated above, strategic action is, in a sense, the point. As Christians we seek to inform our actions with sound discernment. We also learn from our action so that the cycle of discernment continues. What have we learned about the church and its property and how it connects us with the particularities of our neighbourhoods? In some places our parishes seem to be deeply rooted, in others, not so much. What do we learn when we come to a new place and what have we learned when we have left? There is no doubt that we are learning in the process of our discernment and our actions around the St. Matthias and cathedral properties. The cycle of discernment continues.

### Conclusion and Comments

All of this may seem like a great deal of work at a time when the issues are pressing us in way that quick decisions seem necessary. It may very well be that we cannot afford a full-blown, large-scale and thorough examination of each question from each and every possible perspective. Indeed, this will often likely be beyond our grasp. We can however, and I believe we owe it to each other and to God's mission among us, do our best to examine the questions before us from multiple perspectives and to bring these perspectives into conversation with each other.

In some cases, a form of social science research from a Christian perspective is well-suited to facilitating such conversation. In such research a research question is clarified, a literature review is conducted, biblical-theological perspectives are brought together with theoretical concepts, qualitative and/or quantitative research, which itself brings more people into the conversation and discovers new information from which conclusions are drawn. At the end report is available for all to see how these multiple perspectives come together.

Leading congregations (and dioceses) is more complex than ever. We are blessed in this Diocese of Niagara to have a bishop that believes in wide consultation and who listens deeply to what people have to say. I have offered these thoughts from my own learning as a way of thinking about how wide consultation, and listening to diverse perspectives, can be brought together to help us discern our calling in God's mission.

## WORKS CITED

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