

## **THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION IN MINISTRY AND MISSION**

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Theological reflection is becoming more and more recognised as central to the task of integrating ministry and theology in the context of society. It has a more manageable scope than the overall task of systematic theology. It offers some guidelines for the reflective dimension of Christian praxis. In allowing for differences in personal style it encourages reflective practitioners to utilise their strengths while working on their weaknesses. Indeed, it can lay claim to being one of the unifying factors in the developing field of practical theology. Disciplines such as pastoral care, missiology, Christian education and ethics are using theological reflection as a method for teaching and ongoing practice. And yet it is still not discussed as widely as one might expect in theological circles. This is the context that prompts this reflection on theological reflection.

I intend to tease out the concept against the backdrop of systematic theology. Then, appropriately for a method of reflection rooted in our individuality and social context, I will discuss several factors in my own theological reflection style, illustrating how much our approach is shaped by our context.

### **What is theological reflection in ministry and mission?**

The first thing to say about theological reflection is that it is an intermediate activity, neither totally

practical nor totally theoretical, which involves both ministry (or mission) and theology.<sup>1</sup>

As James and Evelyn Whitehead put it in their well-known definition, it is 'the process of bringing to bear in the practical decisions of ministry the resources of Christian faith'.<sup>2</sup>

(In this discussion I take ministry and mission to be overlapping modes of engagement, one oriented more to the life of the church and the other more to transformation in the world, but each an aspect of following Jesus. While theological reflection has been developed more fully in training ministers, I will argue that it is equally important in training 'missioners'.)

In systematic theology 'theological reflection' can have a general meaning. In fact it can simply mean 'doing theology', that is, talking and thinking about God. I must confess that it was some time before I realised that it has a more specific meaning in pastoral theology.<sup>3</sup>

It is true that most systematic theologians value the integration of theological understanding, on the one hand, and engagement in ministry and mission, on the other. Theologians also see theological understanding developing in interaction between the Christian message and our context, seeing theology as an ellipse with two foci.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> James D Whitehead and Evelyn Eaton Whitehead, *Method in ministry: Theological reflection and Christian ministry*, Rev. ed. (Franklin, WI: Sheed & Ward, 1995), xiii.

<sup>2</sup> Whitehead and Whitehead, *Method in ministry*, ix.

<sup>3</sup> Raymond F Collins, *Models of theological reflection* (Lanham, NY: University Press of America, 1984), 41; Robert L Kinast, *What are they saying about theological reflection?* (New York: Paulist, 2000).

<sup>4</sup> Albrecht Ritschl, cited in Langdon Gilkey, *Message and existence: An introduction to Christian theology* (Minneapolis: Seabury Press, 1979), 7.

Nevertheless, the 'context' focus has traditionally been rather philosophical and cultural and, in the task of systematic theology, all embracing. This is theology on a grand scale. Langdon Gilkey talks of the twin foci being the Christian message and human existence (all of it!).<sup>5</sup> Paul Tillich also aims in his theology to correlate the questions implicit in the human situation (all of it) and the answers implicit in the Christian message.<sup>6</sup> David Tracy, similarly, believes that the two sources of theology are Christian texts and common human experiences, and the task of theology is to investigate and correlate the two, in order to 'show the adequacy of the major Christian theological categories for all human existence'.<sup>7</sup> Edward Farley has described the missing element in modern theology as 'the interpretation of situations'.<sup>8</sup>

### **The reflective dimension of praxis**

Liberation theologians have reacted to this very general way of reflecting theologically, insisting that our understanding of God must be more specific, leading clearly to action on behalf of the poor and oppressed. Taking their cue from Karl Marx, they are not content with understanding the world but want theology to be part of the process of transforming it.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Gilkey, *Message and existence*, 7.

<sup>6</sup> Paul Tillich, *Systematic theology*, vol. 1 (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1951), 8.

<sup>7</sup> David Tracy, *Blessed rage for order: The new pluralism in theology* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), 44.

<sup>8</sup> Edward Farley, 'Interpreting situations: An inquiry into the nature of practical theology', in *Formation and reflection: The promise of practical theology*, eds. Lewis S Mudge and James N Poling (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 2.

<sup>9</sup> Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A theology of liberation: History, politics and salvation* (London: SCM, 1974), 9, 15; Karl

They see theology as critical reflection on praxis (committed action), always the second step.<sup>10</sup> The prior step must be Christian prayer and practice; only this can fuel our theological reflection. 'In essence,' says Gustavo Gutiérrez, 'theology helps the commitment to liberation to be more evangelical, more concrete, more effective.'<sup>11</sup>

This 'theological reflection for mission' is clearly more specific than systematic theology, in that it arises from committed action and feeds back into it. It is not the application of general theological principles to specific, practical situations, but a way of life defined by the desire to follow Jesus.<sup>12</sup> This commitment to Christian practice continually throws up faith questions, arising from specific ethical, spiritual and practical questions.<sup>13</sup> There is a continuing dialectic between praxis and critical reflection, always connected to walking the way of Jesus.

My growing appreciation for theological reflection has come through this path — liberation theology and decades of ministry and mission in Melbourne's low-income areas. It sits in the tradition Robert Kinast calls 'a practical style of theological

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Marx and Friedrich Engels, 'Theses on Feuerbach', in *On religion* (New York: Schocken Books, 1964), #11, 72..

<sup>10</sup> Gustavo Gutiérrez, 'The task and content of liberation theology', in *The Cambridge companion to liberation theology*, ed. Christopher Rowland (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 28-29.

<sup>11</sup> Gutiérrez, 'The task and content of liberation theology', 29.

<sup>12</sup> Gutiérrez, 'The task and content of liberation theology', 30.

<sup>13</sup> Ray S Anderson, *The shape of practical theology : Empowering ministry with theological praxis* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 22.

reflection<sup>14</sup>, and what I would call ‘theological reflection for liberation’.<sup>15</sup> In pastoral care, theological reflection has grown out of another dominant context, that of training pastors to respond reflectively to pastoral issues. This approach Kinast calls ‘a ministerial style’.<sup>16</sup> But both share a common way of doing theology, that of practical theology.

### **Theological reflection as practical theology**

Theological reflection begins with the lived experience of a person or group, correlates it with the sources of the Christian tradition and wrestles with the practical implications.<sup>17</sup> It is contextual, communal and experience-based. This is the essence of the method of theological reflection; beyond this it varies according to the context.<sup>18</sup>

Located firmly in the context of ministry and mission, theological reflection lies somewhere between theology-proper (with its larger and more systematic concerns) and ministry-proper (which is immediate and concrete, a way of acting and a mode of being). Its home is in the overlap between theology and

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<sup>14</sup> Kinast, *What are they saying about theological reflection?*, 52-63.

<sup>15</sup> I don't share Rebecca Chopp's belief that the method of critical correlation is limited to the predominantly 'Western white-male' concerns of liberal-revisionist theology of writers such as David Tracy. Rebecca Chopp, 'Practical theology and liberation', in *Formation and reflection: The promise of practical theology*, eds. Lewis Seymour Mudge and James N Poling (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 120-138.

<sup>16</sup> Kinast, *What are they saying about theological reflection?*, 6-14.

<sup>17</sup> Kinast, *What are they saying about theological reflection?*, 1.

<sup>18</sup> Alastair V Campbell, 'The nature of practical theology', in *Theology and practice*, ed. Duncan Forrester (London: Epworth, 1990), 18.

Christian practice. It values both theology and the social sciences, on the one hand, and located human experience on the other.<sup>19</sup>

To engage in theological reflection is to do practical theology, that is theology which self-consciously places itself in the midst of practical concerns.<sup>20</sup> It is shaped by immediate issues and, ideally, shapes our response to those issues. Practical theology is situation-based and lives in interplay with other theological disciplines.<sup>21</sup> Don Browning argues that all theology is ultimately practical in nature, but theological reflection lies at the most practical end of it. He calls this activity 'strategic practical theology', because it is concerned with strategies.<sup>22</sup> It places itself in the two-way crossfire between ideas and the pressing choices we have to make in ministry and mission.

### **Using all the sources of Christian tradition**

While theological reflection deals with more specific questions than does systematic theology, it requires and presupposes the broader work of theology. Therefore, to use the Whiteheads' words quoted

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<sup>19</sup> Whitehead and Whitehead, *Method in ministry*, 3.

<sup>20</sup> Stephen Pattison and James Woodward, 'An introduction to pastoral and practical theology', in *The Blackwell reader in pastoral and practical theology*, eds. James Woodward and Stephen Pattison (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 13. Recent concepts of practical theology distinguish themselves carefully from Friedrich Schleiermacher's views in the 19th century, in which practical theology deductively applied the results of dogmatic theology in the service of the church (Campbell, 'The nature of practical theology', 10-20).

<sup>21</sup> Campbell, 'The nature of practical theology', 18.

<sup>22</sup> Don S Browning, *A fundamental practical theology: Descriptive and strategic proposals* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 55ff.

above, it brings to bear the resources of the Christian faith.<sup>23</sup>

Theologians often discuss the sources of theology,<sup>24</sup> and on their lists we get factors such as scripture, tradition, reason, religious experience, broader personal experience, community experience, culture and praxis. I see no reason to limit the list. Different people emphasise different factors.

For example, as a Baptist I rank scripture high on the list, though my ecumenical and scholarly context has taught me to appreciate the role of tradition and reason in hermeneutics and my praxis amongst the poor teaches me to bring different questions to the text.

As part of the discipleship movement, I place high on my list the life, teaching and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth as a criterion for religious truth and as a model for ministry, difficult though it is to apply.

I also see theology as the task of the community itself and not just its leaders. I agree strongly with the Whiteheads that theological reflection is a corporate task.<sup>25</sup> I often wonder to what extent our churches are engaging *together* in a lively manner with the pressing questions of Christian practice, from sexual ethics to asylum seeker policy, from environmental issues to the apparent absence of God in human tragedy.

### **Solid reflection on the road**

Systematic theology is theological reflection that tries to get overall coherence and balance in articulating faith, aiming to give a good account of the whole Christian meta-narrative. Even though it's

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<sup>23</sup> Whitehead and Whitehead, *Method in ministry*, ix.

<sup>24</sup> See for example, John Macquarrie, *Principles of Christian theology*, Rev. ed. (London: SCM, 1977), 4.

<sup>25</sup> Whitehead and Whitehead, *Method in ministry*, xiii.

unfashionable to say so, it is necessarily systematic, and every thread leads to every other thread in the seamless garment of good systematic theology.

Theological reflection in ministry and mission ideally relates to such an overall theological framework but it isn't under the same pressure to be comprehensive or ordered.

It is not what I spend years doing in a theology degree, but neither is it what I think in the seconds between someone telling me their baby was still-born and my response. It's something in between. It's more like what we thrash out at a church conference, or in a study group in our church, or in a peer group or in spiritual direction. Sometimes it's what we discuss over a long coffee with a good friend, or as we work through a crisis or a deep grief.

It is solid reflection on the road, or what Thomas Groome calls 'theology on our feet'.<sup>26</sup> It's thinking against the background of real situations and with limited time. It shapes our action and our experience shapes it.

### **Integrating our formal and our 'operational' theology**

Theological reflection can reduce the gap between the theology Christians think they subscribe to and the beliefs they actually operate with.

Most of us live with such gaps. I have sometimes come across evangelists who subscribe formally to the belief that those who are not Christians will go to hell when they die, and yet, in their warm and accepting relationships with non-Christians, the

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<sup>26</sup> Thomas A Groome, 'Theology on our feet: A revisionist pedagogy for healing the gap between academia and ecclesia', in *Formation and reflection: The promise of practical theology*, eds. Lewis Seymour Mudge and James N Poling (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 55-78.



evangelists operate as if God will somehow deal fairly and kindly with all those who sincerely search for truth. In the practice of pastoral care many pastors publicly espouse strict sexual ethics and yet, in one-to-one counselling situations, faced with real people in real situations, are very accepting of alternative sexual arrangements.

Herbert Anderson, in an article about the terminally ill, has suggested that amongst those who are dying, there is often this gap between their official and public beliefs and the theology they actually operate with, their 'operational theology'.<sup>27</sup> When I read this I took it home to show to my good friend, Llew Evans, who is ninety years young and who until recently lived for twenty two years as part of our extended family. Llew grabbed the concept of operational theology with delight, and said that it described perfectly how he felt.

Anderson argues that as we reach the end of life the complicated belief framework we use in worship and in relationship to others around us falls away, and we live according to a few deep attitudes that have become habits for us. What caught Llew's attention, and mine, was Anderson's summary of what terminally ill patients need to do (and what all of us could do better): to wait actively, to remember gratefully, to hope realistically, and to trust courageously.<sup>28</sup> There is a calm in this that I return to often. Anderson writes that these four values provide a useful operational theology for the seriously ill. In my copy of the article Llew has added in the margin, 'and for those over eighty!'.

Actually, Llew had already developed his own operational theology. He framed it in a slogan which

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<sup>27</sup> Herbert Anderson, 'After the diagnosis: An operational theology for the terminally ill', *The Journal of Pastoral Care* 43 (1989): 141-150.

<sup>28</sup> Anderson, 'After the diagnosis', 143.

suits those of us who want a more active stance than Anderson's, and I return to this one regularly too: Live joyfully, live simply, live justly. It has meant so much to me that I have included it in a song, the chorus of which is as follows:

Living joyfully, living justly,  
 Living simply, taking care of the earth.  
 In the giving, in receiving  
 Grace-full living comes to birth.

Whether they are seriously ill, ageing or simply pilgrims, Christians who are practised in the habit of theological reflection will be used to relating specific life events to the resources of the Christian faith. The dialectic between concrete situations and theological responses is likely to reduce 'unreflective gaps' between formal theological positions and 'lived beliefs'.

For example, neither the four values listed by Anderson nor the three in Llew's slogan mention Jesus Christ; a reflective Christian may either choose to make a conscious link between these values and the transforming presence of Christ, or be content to say that for them the christological dimension is only implicit in their daily life. In the song just mentioned, I chose to make the christological dimension explicit in one of the verses:

On a journey from all that chokes us,  
 From the cares of having much and wanting  
 more,  
 Seeking first the way of Jesus,  
 In God's Commonwealth, what's in store?

Good theological reflection, it seems, will help people to integrate their operational and their more formal theology by uncovering any gaps and encouraging a conversation between our publicly held views and those which operate in practice. We might venture to say that our operational theology

consists of the few deep beliefs that guide our Christian practice and theological reflection.

### **Factors in my theological reflection style**

As a result of being specific, contextual and personal, rather than general, universal and impersonal, our style of theological reflection will reflect our individuality and will vary greatly from person to person.

With this in mind, I'd like to give some examples of ways in which I find myself reflecting theologically, in the hope that readers may resonate with some of them, on the one hand, and realise that my ways need not be their ways, on the other hand. This more personal style of writing flows from the very nature of theological reflection, which takes a particular situation and tries to relate it to the liberating and transforming presence of God as it is experienced (or perhaps not experienced) in our lives.

I will choose four factors in my theological reflection style: my background, metaphorical theology, mission and community.

### **Autobiography**

I am the eldest son of fundamentalist Salvation Army officers and missionaries who embodied deep integrity and passion for the gospel. I gained many of my ideals and values from my parents. It is also true, however, that their tradition also cramped my style with its holiness theology, authoritarianism, high expectations and low view of human nature. Most of us are a complex combination of taking after our parents and reacting to them. It is no wonder, then, that my natural tendencies are to be serious, idealistic and mission-oriented at the same time as fiercely independent, sceptical, liberal-to-radical, and skilled at hiding my feelings if I so choose.

My family context makes it unsurprising that my theological reflection style until recent decades has been one of feeling inadequate and unspiritual and yet tentatively exploring new territory with a strong desire for integrity.

I am also a baby-boomer, a teenager of the protest generation and part of the education boom of the 1970s.

My generational background makes it unsurprising that I expect Christians to be engaged in social questions to actually make a difference. I came under the influence of the radical discipleship movement, the Protestant evangelical version of liberation theology, and I expect to be challenged by the poor and to carry out my ministry and mission in solidarity with them, as Jesus did.

I feel completely at home when I read liberation theologian Juan Luis Segundo's suggestion that we need to approach old truths with hermeneutical suspicion. He suggests that we ask new questions from a new location, coming up with new understandings and proceeding in a hermeneutical cycle (or, as I prefer to say, a hermeneutical spiral).<sup>29</sup>

As well as my own family story and that of my generation, I have come to appreciate that my personality type affects my theological reflection style. I tend to be introverted, intuitive, a thinker, and the type who seeks closure (in Myers-Briggs Type Indicator jargon, an INTJ).<sup>30</sup> My natural style leads to many traits, such as always wanting to understand

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<sup>29</sup> Juan Luis Segundo, *The liberation of theology* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1977), 9.

<sup>30</sup> Roger R Pearman and Sarah C Albritton, *I'm not crazy, I'm just not you: The real meaning of the 16 personality types* (Palo Alto, CA: Davies-Black, 1997); Bruce Duncan, *Pray your way: Your personality and God* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1993).

more before pronouncing my view; finishing whatever I start, even if it nearly kills me; forgetting where I read or hear things (unless they are in my elaborate records and lists!); trying to be scrupulously fair and tolerant, while underneath facing the temptation to be rather judgemental and sure I'm right; dwelling on the abstract and general things while struggling to remember the concrete and the particular. I know that I can translate complicated ideas simply for others. On the other hand I can sit for hours trying to insert illustrations into my sermons and lectures.

I don't allow personality theory to box me in, but I have found that it's good to acknowledge where I start from when I do the work of developing my less preferred ways of operating. I watch in amazement as others with different personalities think, feel and act so differently from me. I have learnt to value my friends and colleagues deeply.

### **Metaphor**

Talk of God is all metaphorical, it seems to me.<sup>31</sup> Trying to contain the infinite within finite words stretches and strains them almost to laughing point. Rather than this being a limitation, I see it as liberating.

Poetry, art, music, creation, silence, wordless action — these all enter the theological circle, and 'reflection' becomes a concept much wider than discursive thinking. Maybe we should call it 'theological musing' or 'theological exploration'. Paul Tillich reminded us that the classical concept of 'reason' encompassed not only the cognitive aspects of grasping truth but also the aesthetic,

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<sup>31</sup> Janet Martin Soskice, *Metaphor and religious language* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985); Sallie McFague, *Metaphorical theology: Models of God in religious language* (London: SCM, 1983).

practical and even emotional dimensions of intuiting reality.<sup>32</sup> This 'logos' comes from God and invites us to respond to God in life, creativity and joy.

Much of the time I spend preaching or writing songs is spent in finding fresh metaphors or oblique ways of expressing truth. I confess that being a teacher of theology doesn't always encourage me to do this, and I easily slip back into propositional, linear and systematic ways of thinking and speaking.

In the family of metaphor, model and simile I also include imagination, creativity, play, story, the movies, humour, subversion and iconoclasm. I find addressing children to be a good way of indirectly sneaking through the defences of adults. In doing things with children we often allow our inner-child a small chance to surface, as long as 'we're doing it for the kids (smile)'.

I also operate contemplatively, without tying my reflection to words. I'm a keen environmentalist and, like many people, find it easy to commune with God in God's creation. When I go on retreat I only have to walk or jog in the bush or on the beach to be deeply aware of God's presence.

Music deserves an extra word here. I do some of my most distilled theological reflection in congregational song writing. It allows a confluence of lyrics and musical mood. I am aware of the privilege and responsibility of other people singing my songs; the results of my solitary struggle may one day become grist to the mill for someone else. I usually submit my draft songs to those who commission them. Their beauty is central for me, and at times songs seem as much discovered as sculpted. Song writing is far more disciplined and challenging than writing lectures or articles, and the pain of creating a song

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<sup>32</sup> Paul Tillich, *Systematic theology*, vol. 1 (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1951), 80-81.

can seem like giving birth (as far as we males can imagine it, at least!).

Several of my songs mark spiritual breakthroughs for me. A song called 'Lord, you stand among us' is a clear example of productive theological reflection, enabling me to resolve an experience of near burnout through a fresh sense of the Spirit of God.

It was written for the opening of a skills centre for the unemployed, and I had no idea what to write 'for them'. So I wrote 'for myself'. At the time, I was feeling spiritually dry and wrung out. I was drowning in the task of teaching my very first course in theology, realising how words can block out the Spirit and academic theology can lead you down some dead ends. In the writing of the song, unexpectedly I was deeply renewed. It eventually expressed my new understanding about ministry and mission: Doing ministry tasks you can't face (even lecturing, preaching or writing songs) can just about sink us, but God is mysteriously present to take us beyond. In the way of theological reflection, it drew on the insights of process theology, liberation theology, the biblical metaphor of God's Spirit as life-giving breeze and so on, but it brought them to bear on my own experience of near exhaustion.

Chorus:

Lord, you stand among us, you stir within us;

You draw us on beyond what we can do, what we can be,

Revealing your freedom and mystery.

When we search for you and find a void,

When our sense of God has been destroyed,

We need reminding: Jesus came

And stood amongst the poor, the blind, the lame.

Felt our pain, and stretched his hand.

The sky is tinged with dawn.

When we've given in and had our fill,  
 When the air we breathe is stale and still,  
     We feel the gentle breeze: living grace.  
     We tackle obstacles we could not face.  
     We are loved; you stir within.  
     We take the road again.

When we say that's all we want to do,  
 When we shut the door and say we're through,  
     We feel the song of love draw us on:  
     Magnetic mystery, now here, now gone.  
     Sets us free and makes us whole.  
     We plunge into the sea.<sup>33</sup>

For me theological reflection often takes place in the context of struggle and even near despair. But God's grace, in my experience, has always been underlying and irresistible.

### **Mission**

Earlier I suggested that theological reflection for ministry is well developed but that it is equally suited for the praxis of mission. Of course ministry and mission are almost inseparable. A balanced approach to ministry always opens out to the world in mission. Conversely, a holistic approach to mission is for the most 'ministerial' in style, that is, incarnational and servant-like. When it comes to personal evangelism, a good deal of faith-sharing consists simply of sensitive theological reflection in the natural context of a conversation with a seeker.

I am deeply mission-oriented because the gap between what is and what could be under God's liberating reign is an ever-present existential reality. To love with a large heart is to feel the pain of the world. I find myself reflecting theologically at nearly

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<sup>33</sup> Ross Langmead, *On the road: Sixteen songs for the Christian community to sing* (Melbourne: Ross Langmead, 1987), 34-35.



every moment of engagement — as I read the newspaper or as I listen on the phone to a friend in distress who finds God absent.

In a single day I can feel the suffering of the people of Iraq, my mother's chronic pain, my friend's alcoholism, Australia's loss of moral direction and the inability of settler-Australians to say sorry to indigenous Australians. I sometimes wonder if I'm hooked on pain. But I'm equally blessed with hope and a sense of God's mysterious presence. In a single day I can also see God in creation, sense the holy in several people, get excited by some poetry or music, and enjoy watching a theological student grapple with important questions. I see both sides. I am driven by the deep need for transformation. As Snoopy the dog (in Charles Schultz's Charlie Brown cartoons) says, lying on top of his kennel, 'Underneath this calm and collected surface lies a heart in raging turmoil!'

Mission is the commitment to join God's ongoing work to transform the world. It is inescapably political, given that the Good News is essentially about the possibility of peace, justice and love. So theological reflection takes us into all the difficult areas of life, endeavouring to discern what policies are just and workable, and how we should treat the earth.

Mission seeps into all of life as we live out the good news, just as pastoral ministry seeps into all of life as we potentially express care in all relationships. If mission were all action, with no reflection, we would go off the rails. We would 'hard sell' the gospel, organise our way to being an international brand name, manage the church and cram every living moment with mission activity. But it's mission with mystery, and waiting is as important as outreach, listening as speaking, responding as pro-active

planning.<sup>34</sup> The reflective and meditative dimension of mission is central.

This is parallel to theological reflection in ministry. The pastoral challenges of life seem to pop up and hit us unannounced. People hurt at inconvenient times. My pastoral style is to feel quite inadequate, to say so, to pray for calm and wisdom, and then to try to 'be there'. It is fairly unsophisticated, really. Paradoxically, exercising pastoral care has been harder since becoming a theological teacher, because I feel I ought to know better; but I don't. I have to trust the mystery even more. I need to remind myself that there is a role for wounded healers, those who know pain and limitation and yet, in being healed by God, may share that healing with others.<sup>35</sup>

### **Community**

I can't imagine theological reflection occurring other than in the context of Christian community. While there are many ways to pursue community, my experience of it is local and intentional. Apart from the first year of married life, I have lived in an extended family by choice all my adult life. For more than twenty-five years I've been in a weekly home-based small group that consciously pursues Christian community.

Most of my fellow group members don't have much formal education. Some are so shy they pass when we read, share or pray. Some are psychiatrically disabled or unemployed. For most of the time we've had children in the group. Sometimes 'associate members', who are not Christians but who come for the meal, are present as we wrestle with our

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<sup>34</sup> Donald E Messer, *Contemporary images of Christian ministry* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1989).

<sup>35</sup> Henri J Nouwen, *The wounded healer: Ministry in contemporary society* (Doubleday: New York, 1979), 88.

pastoral problems or biblical interpretation, and as we share where we find God in the events of the week, or weep with a member whose daughter committed suicide or a member who has had throat cancer diagnosed. Our Bible studies on forgiveness at one time were very relevant, given two members of the group weren't speaking to each other; this was a classic instance of group theological reflection with inescapable consequences.

At times group life has been an enormous discipline, but most of the time, I learn a great deal from honest working class theological brilliance. I'm amazed that over the years we've grappled in depth with metaphors for God, with the problem of suffering, with who Jesus was and even with process theology as a way of understanding how God is at work in the world. It is in my small group that I do much of my theological reflection. We love to sing, and often after singing a song, we stop and talk about what we gained from it.

I'm very fortunate to be part of both my small group and the college community where I teach. It is generally the grace of God in my friends, more than my belief system, that enables me 'to wait actively, to remember gratefully, to hope realistically, and to trust courageously'. It is the patience of fellow pilgrims that helps me to overcome my stubborn independence and taste God's new commonwealth in which all relationships are transformed.

## **Conclusion**

In discussing four factors in my own theological reflection style — autobiography, metaphor, mission and community — I hope I have shown how specific, contextual and personal theological reflection is. By extension, I trust that readers will be encouraged to value their own specific context and style.

I've suggested that theological reflection involves bringing together the resources of the Christian tradition (such as scripture, theology and experience) and a particular event, situation or challenge. It is the reflective dimension of Christian praxis, repeated in an ongoing dialectical way from day to day, shaped by experience as well as shaping that experience. It sits at the most practical end of the theological spectrum and can be said to be one of the defining features of the field of practical theology.

I have a cousin called Margaret, a potato farmer in her mid-seventies, who literally laughs at the idea of practical theology. We joke about my job. 'Still reading books and thinking?', she says with a laugh, as if to say that nothing could be less practical. I wonder what she'd say about reflecting on theological reflection. But, if she only knew, Margaret engages in practical theology nearly every day because she relates her faith to her daily life. She expresses her faith through traditional country-style hospitality, cooking, caring for the sick and a simple faith in God. I sometimes wish she would reduce the gap between her formal and operational theology, the former seeming dogmatic and judgemental to me while the latter seems to be overwhelmingly generous and welcoming. But I guess we see the gaps in others more easily than in ourselves.

It is my hope that one day my cousin Margaret will understand how practical theology can be, indeed, how practical it must be.