Free for Mission: Missional Church and Ethnographic Fieldwork

Scott J. Hagley
Associate Professor of Missiology, Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, Pittsburgh, PA
shagley@pts.edu

Abstract

Working at the intersection of ethnographic and missional theology, this essay argues for the central role of fieldwork for discerning missional identity in congregations. Recent developments in ecclesiology and ethnography have clarified the embodied nature of theological knowledge, disclosing the practical wisdom and cultural locatedness of the researcher and congregation. While ethnography has been used to help congregations understand their context and discern a missional vocation, the ongoing theological and formational nature of such practices are often undertheorized in relationship to missional church. Drawing from Robert Jenson's notion of the Spirit as God's freedom, liberating God and creature for God's future, this essay suggests ethnographic fieldwork as a liberative practice for the congregation, freeing it to participate in the boundary-crossing and sensemaking work of missional church.

In working with congregations, I'm often greeted by some version of the question: "Are we (meaning, the congregation I'm working with) missional yet?" The question comes loaded with

curiosity and concern. What, they ask, *is* a missional church, and would we know one if we saw it? Even more significant: how will we know when the work we are doing to renew our theological imagination and develop partnerships with our neighbors will pay off? The question comes from a good place, but it also leads into a deceptive trap, for any answer will betray the dynamism that "missional" tries to name (Guder 1998, 3–5). And yet, the question also unveils a theo-practical ambiguity at the heart of the missional church. The problem is not just that *missio Dei* theology holds together unreconciled tensions between the God-church-world relationship, but that the boundary-crossing practices that shape the missional vocation of a congregation are viewed instrumentally, as a means to a missional end. Congregations, seeking to identify as "missionary by [their] very nature," and reorient congregational life through practices of missional discernment, can be forgiven for thinking of "missional" as a fixed arrival point (Guder 2015, 9).

In what follows, I explore the theological significance of ethnographic practices for missional congregations. A staple of many approaches to missional renewal and missional church plants, church leaders and steering committees regularly employ the basic tools of ethnographic fieldwork to better understand their own community and their context or neighborhood (Croft and Hopkins 2015; Roxburgh 2011). In descriptive terms, these practices equip congregants for deep listening, attentive observation, and disciplined curiosity. They also place congregants in new places and with new people, drawing these experiences into congregational reflection and discernment. While neither professional ethnographers nor academic theologians, congregants are given through these practices new connections to neighbors and offered new vantage points from which to reflect upon the life and ministry of the congregation. As such, they are not simply a means to a missional end, but rather practices that already participate in God's missional future. Congregational ethnographic fieldwork can cultivate new social realities which glimpse—and perhaps even liberate—the congregation for God's mission in its particular context.

Of course, ethnographic fieldwork is not a theological practice by itself, nor can missional theology be collapsed into ethnography. At stake in this discussion is how *otherness* is reconciled with the *missio Dei,* how one envisions the relationship between God and God's creation, the church and God's present and coming Reign (see Swart et al. 2009). Drawing from Robert Jenson's understanding of the Spirit as God's freedom and God's future, I suggest a liberative approach to missional church. Rather than a fixed identity or a future *telos,* the missional church is liberated for God's mission *by* and *through* the neighbor, the stranger, the other in and through the ministry of the Holy Spirit. The church sent into the world *recognizes* and *receives* God's "preferred and promised future" in the concrete relationships cultivated (Keifert 2006, 16). Ethnography, shaped by this missional intention, becomes an ongoing practice for missional theology, not only a step toward a missional identity.

Are We There Yet? Liberating Missional Church

Darrell Guder says it is "the widespread consensus that the 'church is missionary by its very nature'" (Guder 2015, 9). After the 1952 International Missionary Council meeting in Willingen, Vatican II, the WCC study on the "Missionary Structure of the Congregation," and (among other things) the Gospel and Our Culture Network, Guder's assertion remains uncontroversial. The question, however, is what "missionary by nature" means. In the latter half of the twentieth century, the missionary identity of the church has been understood in relationship to the *missio Dei,* summed up by David Bosch as "the classical doctrine on the *missio Dei* as God the Father sending the Son, and God the Father and God the Son sending the Spirit was expanded to include yet another 'movement': Father, Son, and Holy Spirit sending the church into the world" (Bosch 2011, 399). Thus, the missionary church is the church sent into the world by the missionary God. However, besides a general theocentric reframing of mission, the meaning and implications of

missio Dei for the church remain ambiguous. Dwight Zscheile and Craig van Gelder track four different interpretations of missional church across academic and popular treatments of the missionary nature of the church, with different implications for each interpretation (Gelder and Zscheile 2011, 10–11).

According to John Flett, the reason for this ambiguity can be traced back to a deficient trinitarianism in the *missio Dei,* in which the gap between God and world is overcome by "sending" as a "second step alongside who he is from all eternity" (Flett 2010, 19). In its classic articulation after Willingen, *missio Dei* holds together two competing theological strands. On the one hand, Karl Hartenstein brought a concern for God's sending agency in mission. The missionary act is in response to the sending activity of Father and Son. On the other hand, the American confederation brought an explicitly Trinitarian rationale for mission which served to minimize the ways mission has been Christologically understood. God is at work, not only through the church, but also in historical movements for justice and liberation. Jacques Matthey calls these two positions the "classical" and the "ecumenical" approaches to *missio Dei* (Matthey 2001, 429–30, quoted in Flett, 2010, 53–54). However, Flett identifies a shared flaw in both positions: neither clarifies the relationship between God and world. Mission either extends Christ's work to the world by way of the Church or names divine action drawing history toward a more just end. The first approach envisions the Church crossing the gap between God and world, and so provides theocentric cover for mission to carry on as it always has been. The second approach dissolves the Church into various activist movements without ever identifying discrimen for discerning the shape of God's mission (Flett 2010, 35–57). Neither approach clarifies how the life of Father, Son, and Spirit relates to the world: "The problem is not that one is Trinitarian and the other is not; the problem is that both draw on an identical and insufficient Trinitarianism" (Flett 2010, 56). Without addressing this ambiguity, the missionary nature of the Church is bound to be confused.

Flett appeals to Barth's doctrine of reconciliation to situate the *missio Dei* on more firm footing. By doing so, he locates *missio Dei's* trinitarianism within Christology and soteriology. For Barth, the Chalcedonian formula draws the human creature into the Trinitarian communion in a way that protects the otherness of God and the creature. The gap between God and world is thus bridged within the being of God, and not as a secondary sending. As God and creature, Jesus Christ's election by the Father is also the election of all humanity. Thus, God's economy of salvation, God's reconciliation of the world to God, is also properly located within the triune being of God. For Flett, these doctrines renew and redirect the missionary vision of the Church. If mission belongs to the being of God, then it also belongs to the very being or nature of the Church. Mission is not properly the action of the Church or the bridging between God and world, but rather the witness of the Church to what God has accomplished in Jesus Christ: "Jesus Christ's resurrection from the dead, the sending of the Spirit, and the spilling of his community out onto the streets proclaiming his name to the ends of earth and of time reveal the nature of God's own perfection in and for himself" (Flett 2010, 248).

While offering insightful analysis of problems inherent in *missio Dei* and providing a road map for resolving them, Flett's approach neglects the idiosyncratic nature of congregations and the way in which the missionary nature of ordinary congregations is practiced and expressed. Because the gap between God and world is solved within the life of God as a singular and fulfilled act, Flett's Barthian approach does not address the experience of narrative surprise and discovery critical to congregational mission. "Missionary by its very nature" becomes a statement about ecclesial ontology rooted in the singular act of God's missionary being. The practicalities of bearing witness in a particular context among a variety of others are not clearly connected to the formal theological argument. When researchers and theologians work from the missional practice of the local congregation, however, the theocentric orientation of *missio Dei* relativizes the various ministries of the congregation, simultaneously empowering the

congregation to learn from outsiders and surprises.[1] Fresh Expressions will use a "Neighborhood Audit" to this end; "The Missional Network" and "Partnership for Missional Church," and many others employ similar tools and practices meant to help congregations and church leaders to learn from, open up to, and be shaped by the concerns, interests, gifts, and hopes operative in a particular context (see Croft and Hopkins 2005; Center for Congregations 2020; Church Innovations Institute 2020). Thus, the surprises and diversities of local missional practice are disconnected from the Trinitarian problematics of *missio Dei,* and vice versa. Approaches to missional church that lead congregations to ask "are we there yet" rely upon vague notions of *missio Dei,* in which the practices meant to help congregations "become" missional are interpreted as a means to rediscovering our missional nature. But approaching the question without the particularities of congregation and mission in mind only exacerbates the distance. What is needed, I will suggest below, is a different vantage point from which to consider the theological density of missional church practices. Beginning with Robert Jenson's understanding of the Holy Spirit as the freedom of God, I suggest a pneumatological frame for considering God's surprising and liberative work, freeing the congregation for listening and responding to a host of others—God, neighbor, world—as a participation in the mission of God.

The Spirit and the Freedom of God

As mentioned above, congregations discern their own participation in God's mission by attending to and learning from those outside the congregation. Encounter with others through the crossing of boundaries is critical for learning about one's context and learning

1. This is not true of all approaches to missional church. But at least three of the "branches" of the missional church identified by Gelder and Zscheile have proponents that encourage congregational learning as part of the journey toward missional. Only the "Discovering" missional publications draws "missional" language without some engagement with the broader conversation around *missio Dei* (Gelder and Zscheile 2011, 10–11).

to witness to the gospel in those places. Insisting upon the missionary nature of the congregation infuses these practices with the burden of faithfulness—to engage such discernment is central to its very life as church. Rather than working from a prior grounding of the missional identity of the church in ontology, Robert Jenson's theology offers a "revisionary metaphysics," which can offer a vision of congregational mission more attentive to boundary-crossing congregational practice (Jenson 2004, vii–viii).[2] Stepping around the usual tensions between being and personhood that guide Trinitarian doctrine, Jenson approaches Trinity with the narratives that disclose the identities of Father, Son, and Spirit.[3] In doing this, he highlights the relational dynamism of the Trinity revealed as a story involving the action(s) of creatures in history: or, rather, history *in* God. Participation in the story of Father, Son, and Spirit requires an open posture expressed as receptivity to the future and all those included in it. The missionary nature of the church is an invitation to participate, an identity disclosed in retrospect, a promised future granted by the liberating Spirit and made concrete in the various others "join[ed] at the body of Jesus" (Jennings 2017, 8).

For Jenson, questions about the being and nature of God are resolved in relationship to the narratives attributed to God, what he calls the *dramatis Dei personae* or the drama of the characters of God. Jenson's doctrine of God thus emerges in relationship to the events by which God identifies Godself: God is the one who raised Jesus from the dead and who has raised Israel from Egypt. The *dramatis Dei personae* becomes the lens through which Jenson understands Trinity and God's relationship to the world. History

2. It is worth noting that Jenson never engages missional church (and only occasionally treats mission) in his writing. As such, I am extending his Trinitarian theology to suggest a framework for ecclesiology that is not Jenson's.

3. Critical to Jenson's theology is a narrative understanding of personhood, where personal identity is rendered coherent in retrospect and in relationship to a series of events by which that person is identified. A person, Jenson says, is "a sequence of events that before the event retains the capacity to surprise, yet after the event displays a coherent dramatic sense that has been tightened by that very event" (Jenson 2014, 199).

occurs not only in God, but "as [God's] being," revealing God's *roominess* to accommodate otherness in the triune life of God (Jenson 1997, 221, 226). Drawing together a cluster of metaphors, Jenson concludes that the life of the triune God is an event, a person, a decision, and a conversation (Jenson 1997, 222–23). Because plot development requires multiple agents and coherence to be meaningfully dramatic, the various aporias of Trinitarian theology—three and one, communion and otherness, freedom and history—are given dynamic energy and creative room without spiraling into incoherence or settling for oversimplifications. Within such a framework, theology offers a "revisionary" and perhaps chastened metaphysics (Jenson 2014). God is known within the experience of time and the events of history, rather than through deep structures of normativity or philosophical speculation.

It is not just that we know God by nature of the resurrection or the exodus, but that the divine drama is the very life of God. The "Triune Identity," as Jenson frames it, is known in the dramatic interaction of Father, Son, and Spirit before, among, between, and within God's creation (Jenson 1997, 63ff). "God is what happens between Jesus and his Father in their Spirit. But in the present connection [with creation] we may also say: God is what happens to Jesus and the world" (Jenson 1997, 221). In Jenson's thought, this point is critical, for it both guards the difference between God and creature and holds open the possibility of creaturely union with God; the roominess of God's triune life does not blur the distinction between God and creation, but rather discloses the way in which God distinguishes Godself "from others by not excluding them but by including them," beginning in the "act of creation" (Jenson 1997, 226). Theological interpretation invites interaction with and involvement in the divine story. Thus, the contingencies of history, creation, and experience are inevitably part of theological construction.

Jenson's narrative approach to Trinitarian theology identifies dynamic creativity within God's own life in the Spirit as liberator, or as God's future and—as James Henry says—"*freedom in God's own life*" (Henry 2018, xxv). Jenson distinguishes his position

from classical theology, where relations of origin describe the triune economy: The Son begotten of the Father and the Spirit's procession from the Father through the Son. While fixed in the creeds, relations of origin struggle to distinguish the identity of Spirit and Son in relationship to the Father, which often results in ambiguous approaches to Pneumatology (Henry 2018, 116–40). Jenson addresses this problem by considering the triune economy in relationship to the unfolding of the *dramatis Dei personae*. Because history is in God, Jenson understands the Spirit proceeding from the Father but also liberating Father and Son for God's own future: as "witness to the Son and the freedom of the Father" (Henry 2018, 124). As the "first fruits" (Rom 8:23), "deposit" or "guarantee" (2 Cor 1:22) of the Reign of God, the Spirit's identity is disclosed in the manifestation of God's promised future as inaugurated by Christ. The delay of the Parousia makes the Pentecost a "dramatic necessity," where the Spirit poured out on all flesh connects the ministry of Jesus to God's desire to gather the nations to Israel (Jenson 1999, 178). At the Pentecost, the Spirit liberates the disciples for God's future, expressed as communion and connection where it did not exist before. For when the Spirit descends, women and men from the nations hear the word of God in their mother tongue and are drawn into a community of eschatological promise. As the word of God is received by the nations, and as the nations are drawn into the story of Israel's God, "a ruptured world begins to grow together" (Welker 1994, 230). This dramatic action of the Spirit works from the eschatological future, working from the perspective of the fulfillment of God's promises and intentions. In this way, the Spirit is both the Spirit of Jesus and God's future.

Such a view is compatible with broader biblical testimonies to the Spirit as the liberator of God's people for service and holistic witness to God's intentions for creation, who frees both God and creature for communion. Shared by Father and Son, the Spirit is the freedom of God for the reciprocal, roomy, ecstatic love that is the Triune God. In the memorable phrase of John V. Taylor, the Spirit is the "go-between God" (Taylor 1972). So also, the Spirit frees human persons for participation in the drama of God. We

become, in Christ and through the Spirit, *dramatis personae* in the story of God. Gathered as the body of Christ, we become—by God's Spirit—witnesses to the future of God. Liberated by the Spirit for participation in the life of God, the church encounters and contributes to the "force field" of love that is Spirit poured out on all flesh as a witness to the future of God and God's creation (Welker 1994, 230ff).

Thus, participation in the life of God means participation with the characters of the drama of God by the power of the Spirit, to be caught up in the "field" of the Spirit's action (Welker 1994, 230). The roominess of God is made manifest in the action of the Spirit (Jenson 1997, 25). In this way, the "event" and "conversation" that is God includes the creatures and historical events by which God has identified Godself (Jenson 1997, 222–23). Acting from God's future, the Spirit liberates creation for participation in God, and so the identity of the Spirit is revealed in the liberation that makes possible the ends of God. Thus, the Spirit is "God as the power of his own future, God as beyond himself to be life and act, God as his own goal" (Jenson 1978, 54). In this way, we can see Jenson's *dramatis Dei personae* as another way of understanding what is at stake in a theology of the *missio Dei.* As both agent and end of mission, the Triune God draws, frees, and invites creatures to participate *together* in God's life and reconciling work. As *dramatis personae* in the story of God, the missional church is free in Christ and through the Spirit to receive and recognize its future in partnerships with other characters in the divine drama.

It is here, within Jenson's understanding of the Spirit as the power of God's own future, as the liberator of God and creature for relationship, where fieldwork can be envisioned in terms of God's mission, and where missional theology invites ethnographic research. For while the Spirit is God's power to be God's own goal, the drama of God that the Spirit draws to a conclusion includes (through the Son and in the Father) all the other dramatic characters liberated and gifted for participation in the divine drama. Congregational participation in the Triune life, then, is necessarily tied up with the creativity of Spirit. As Pentecost makes clear, the

creational scope of the Spirit's liberating work invites and involves boundary-crossing movement, and such boundary-crossing movement directs the disciples to recognize new implications of the death and resurrection of Christ. In congregational mission, eschatological hope finds concrete, though incomplete, form in the partnerships between congregation and community as it is animated by the Spirit of God. Free in the Spirit to listen and learn from one another, God, and neighbor, the congregation encounters a world of characters/actors and (sometimes) surprise that invites it to retell and revise its story as a participant in the broader drama of the triune God. Thus, for the liberating Spirit to free congregations for renewed missional identity, the congregation needs to be open to what might be genuinely new or surprising, an openness disciplined and practiced in ethnographic inquiry. The missionary nature of the church, I suggest, is not only grounded in the being of God but also liberated by the Spirit of God for surprise, and so fundamentally open to that which is Other. Where it is engaged with what I will call a missional sensibility, ethnographic fieldwork can be understood as participation in God's "preferred and promised future" (Keifert 2007, 16). To the question—"are we missional yet?"—ethnographic fieldwork provides a provocative answer: "Have you been surprised? Have you found yourself in new places and with new mission partners?"[4]

Free for Mission: Fieldwork and Missional Sensibility

In recent years, a cadre of scholars from several different disciplines have gathered around the simple idea that ecclesiology requires the study of actual congregations (Ammerman 1998; Ward 2012; Scharen 2015; James 2018). Drawing from ethnography, congregational studies, and practical theology methodologies, these scholars articulate how it is that ethnographies of congregations do legitimate theological work. While not exclusively about

4. Thanks to John Ogren for noticing the primacy of these questions for a missional sensibility.

ecclesiology or ethnography, the two terms envision theological dimensions to fieldwork and a fieldwork dimension for theology; or, as Natalie Wigg-Stevenson has said, an "ethnographic theology" (2014). By considering the integration of ethnography and theological inquiry, ethnographic theologies envision body and place as generative and even necessary for theological construction, underscoring the embodied nature of theological inquiry. That is, ethnography helps attend to the ways in which the experience of the body in the world, the location of bodies in relationship to one another, and the basic dimensions of creaturely limitation and hermeneutic perspective all shape theological reflection. Drawing from the work of Natalie Wigg-Stevenson and Mary Fulkerson, I offer a missional twist on ethnographic fieldwork as a participation in the liberating work of the Spirit. No longer instrumental toward some missional end, fieldwork both draws the congregation into disclosive relationships and clarifies the congregation's own missional possibilities.

In *Ethnographic Theology,* Natalie Wigg-Stevenson draws from Pierre Bourdieu's conception of *habitus* to suggest the body as a "vector" for theological knowledge. She argues that ethnographic theology discloses what the body *knows* in relationship to God and world along with the narratives and sources of one's theological tradition. In Bourdieu's thought, *habitus* names bodily dispositions and perceptions sedimented in persons by nature of their participation in particular fields of practice. Relative to a cultural field, a *habitus* both reflects and constructs or reproduces practices: "In short, the habitus, the product of history, produces individual and collective practices, and hence history, in accordance with the schemes engendered by history" (Bourdieu 1977, 82). As a field of practice, congregations both reflect and construct a particular *habitus,* and so does the theologian. Within such a framework, the cycles of experience–reflection–action proposed by practical theology and the disciplinary distinctions observed in congregational studies miss the point. The knowledge and histories reflected in the congregation are not exclusively practical or ideational, but also habitual and dispositional. The use of social

science interviews or participant observation, then, cannot help but shape our theological work, and any theological reflection we do inevitably reflects dispositional attributes of class, gender, race, education, etc. *Habitus* renders the disciplinary distinctions of both social scientist and theologian problematic.

Because it addresses inherited, structural, and embodied dimensions of cultural participation, Bourdieu's theory of practice invites theology to attend to its own reflexive and embodied dimensions. The theologian herself inhabits a particular *habitus* in relationship to various fields of practice—church, academy, judicatory, etc.—while her theological work contributes to and participates in various processes of cultural production, all of which is produced by, reflective of, constructive for the life of faith in the world. In its shape and outcome, the work is inevitably placed and "carnal" (Scharen 2015, 91–110; see also Wacquant 2005). Thus, Bourdieu's *habitus* functions both prescriptively and descriptively for theology. Recognizing the inescapability of the body (one's own and others) for the interpretation and production of knowledge, Bourdieu helps theologians attend to the communities of faith that shape one's own theologizing, as well as the communities for whom one seeks to produce theology.

Wigg-Stevenson builds Bourdieu's theory into her methodology, developing a collaborative approach to theological construction with an adult education class at First Baptist Church in Nashville, TN. Concerned with issues of theological agency and production, Wigg-Stevenson offers short lectures and introductions on significant Christian thinkers and topics—Scripture, Trinity, Calvin, Contextual theologies—before inviting the class to respond to and interact with these topics and thinkers. As an ethnographic theology, Wigg-Stevenson imagines herself as an "objectified participant" in theological production (Wigg-Stevenson 2014, 59–62). She both leads and participates in the discussion, while also attending to (objectifying) her own choices, experience, dispositions, etc. She sees herself embodying a bridge between academic and everyday theology, and she attends to how it is that theologies are produced at places of disruption and difference.

She is not, in her own view, a detached observer of the congregation, but rather one whose embodied presence and formation brings particular wisdom and insights into the adult education class, while also soliciting particular responses from the class. In her research, she both shares in the *habitus* of the congregation and makes it visible through reflection and conversation (Wigg-Stevenson 2013).

At stake is a post-Cartesian vision of theology which cultivates processes of attentiveness and practices of reflection before it worries about producing theological materials or essays. Theological reflection, in her view, attends to the body as necessary for theological knowledge, because human knowing is both social and bodily, expressed in communities of practice and sedimented as a *habitus*. It is not that essays or academic theology are unimportant, just that without reflexive collaboration with communities of practice the theologian misses an important source of knowledge. She says: "Ethnographic theology, because it is conscious of the fact that it rises from embodied practice as much as if not more so than from texts, is able to see embodiment as a vector of, not an obstacle to, knowledge" (Wigg-Stevenson 2014, 140). The ethnographic theologian, that is, not only attends to bodies but also recognizes one's own embodied presence and experience as partially constructive of theological knowledge. The "vector" of knowledge that is the body is thus situated through ethnography in a particular world of practice and interaction and memory and history, which—through the questions and attentiveness of the ethnographer—performs a particular theological understanding.[5]

In her approach to ethnographic theology, Wigg-Stevenson draws from the work of Mary McClintock Fulkerson's work in *Places of Redemption,* which connects post-modern place theory and Bourdieu's concept of habitus to articulate the theological importance of *place* as a necessary element of embodiment. Place-theory provides for Fulkerson a means of extending Bourdieu's

5. In this, she is working with Kathryn Tanner's work to find a vocation for the academic theologian in relationship to the construction of "everyday theology" (see Tanner 1997).

conception of practice to the life of a congregation. The congregation, for Fulkerson, is not only an organization sustained by practices and rituals, but also a place: "a gathering of meanings" that "[endure] through practices" in the bodies, habits, social imagination, and artifacts of the congregation (Fulkerson 2007, 36). Places, according to Fulkerson's construction, both constitute and are constituted by the communities, narratives, and practices gathered there. Extending Bourdieu's *habitus,* we *know* place as a dense gathering of meanings, as bodily dispositions, and a way of moving through the world. So also, we make places by our movement, interpretations, and interaction within a locale. For theology, place-theory provides a robust frame for the interconnectedness of sociology and theology in understanding the dimensions of faith and a faith community. Someone located somewhere constructs theological knowledge; through ethnography and other fieldwork practices, the body and place and not only sites for such knowledge, but collaborators and contributors to theology (Fulkerson 2007, 52).

By making place and embodiment visible in her theological work, Fulkerson challenges approaches to practical theology that imagine a discrete moment of theological reflection apart from questions of place and attentiveness to social phenomena. Within the rush of experience and data, theologians operate with a "nonfoundational sensibility" that functions in the background, alerting the theologian to "what deserves attention—of what is out of place, of what is broken and needs to be fixed, as well as of what is good and compels thanksgiving" (Fulkerson 2007, 14). This sensibility, of course, reflects the theologian's own cultural and theological formation, and reflective of her own *habitus* and sense of place. In Fulkerson's own work, she identifies a dual sensibility for the ethnographic theology: attention to the "place of the wound" in communities with an interest in "*the logic of transformation*" (Fulkerson 2007, 14, 22).

Both approaches chart significant directions for theological inquiry beyond fact-value, mind-body, and subject-object dichotomies. Wigg-Stevenson's reflexive and collaborative approach

to ethnographic theology begins to imagine a different role for the theologian in relationship to congregations. The theologian, in Wigg-Stevenson's work, not only attends to the everyday life of faith, but invites congregations into public performances of theological construction. And, while Fulkerson emphasizes collaboration less, she draws into focus the theological dimensions of social science tools because of the embodied, placed nature of human knowing. Bodies, practices, places, and communities, in both proposals, are envisioned as theologically constructive. Communities of practice place both theologian and community, forming and informing the theologian because embodiment—and the dimensions of place and movement that embodiment suggests—is a "vector" of theological knowledge (Wigg-Stevenson 2014, 140). This is true for both the theologian and the community in collaboration. The reflexive tools of ethnography clarify for the theologian her own presuppositions and "sensibility" operating in the background (Wigg-Stevenson's "objectified participant"), sedimented as part of the *habitus* and reflective of one's own participation in various communities of practice. Ethnographic practices help to clarify *where* it is that the theologian is working *from*. But they also bring the particularities of the community into the open as well.

However, ethnography for a "worldly church" remains, in the end, focused on the church situated in the world rather than missional nature of the church for the world (Fulkerson 2007). Ethnographic theology tends to describe human experience of God as mediated through the practices and narratives of an ecclesial community. As Fulkerson suggests, the conditions for transformation are cultivated when theology makes visible the situation of a congregation. But one also brings to the descriptive task any number of assumptions rooted in one's social location and theological interests. Fulkerson's interest in transformation within a diversely-abled, interracial congregation helps her articulate the place of the wound as situating her ethnographic theology. Following Fulkerson, but with an interest in how the congregation can discern its participation in God's mission in its context, a *missional* sensibility for fieldwork will attend to the spaces and relationships where the

status quo of congregational life is challenged or provoked by new relationships or unexpected partnerships. Drawing additional guidance from Wigg-Stevenson, such a sensibility will attend to the places of difference, disruption, and surprise. For God's mission, as I've argued elsewhere, precipitates a crisis for the congregation, because "the arrows in mission do not point in only one direction, but rather come back to shape the church sent out into the neighborhood" (Hagley 2019, 51–52). Echoing Fulkerson and Wigg-Stevenson's insights, then, I suggest that a missional sensibility in relationship to ethnography *emerges from* and *attends to* boundary-crossing movements of the congregation; ethnography becomes missional theology at the place of disruption and difference, at the intersection and interaction between congregation and community.

Attending to boundary-crossing movements in relationship to the neighborhood and practiced by members of the congregation, a missional sensibility within fieldwork is a liberative practice which embodies possibilities for God's future. The focus on boundary crossing focuses ethnographic attention on the dense network of relationships within which the congregation is located. This act of understanding and interpretation is inevitably theological, since the congregation engages fieldwork from within a Christian *habitus,* which situates attentive study and interpretation within strands of the Scriptural narrative and the broad hopes of Christian eschatology. Similarly, because ethnographic fieldwork requires boundary-crossing movement, it can help facilitate a missional sensibility. The ethnographer, through participant observation becomes an "objectified participant" in the boundary-crossing movement of church and possible neighborhood partners (Wigg-Stevenson 2014, 59–62). In this way, the bodies at the intersection between congregation and neighborhood are a "vector" of theological knowledge, a source of disruption and surprise in the missional discernment of the congregation (Wigg-Stevenson 2014, 140).

For these reasons, approaches to missional church involve the congregation—and not only theologians or pastors—in various

ethnographic practices. Because missional church assumes a fluid, dynamic, and contextual ecclesial identity, missional congregations are encouraged to pay attention to their particular context. Drawing from ethnographic practices, missional congregations are encouraged to cross boundaries and interview, observe, and learn from neighbors and neighborhood partners to discern missional vocation. They attentively cross boundaries with a missional sensibility. By crossing boundaries to understand its context, persons in the congregation place their bodies in new places, embodying new theological possibilities before the congregation articulates or conceptualizes a missional future. Placing congregants in new places and with new people with a discerning posture, ethnographic practice with and for a missional sensibility practices and points toward future possibilities for the congregation. Such attentive boundary-crossing opens the congregation to new surprising possibilities while also embodying new possible partnerships.

Conclusion

The question "Are we missional yet?" betrays uncertainty about the missional-theological nature of various processes and practices designed to help congregational missional discernment. While ethnographic fieldwork has helped theologians attend to the embodied and local dimensions of theological construction, and while it has been utilized in helping congregations to understand their cultural context, the theological dimensions of its boundary-crossing practices are not always clear. Because fieldwork with a missional sensibility places congregants in new settings, equipping them for observation, participation, and reflection, it offers a set of practices that can surprise the congregation, freeing it for new possibilities of congregational life in relationship to its concrete setting. Fieldwork, in the life of the congregation, participates in the liberating work of the Holy Spirit, preparing the congregation for God's "preferred and promised future" by disciplining persons in the congregation to cross boundaries with open hearts and minds (Keifert 2006, 16). Thus, the fieldwork of the congregation

is not in service to a missional identity, but partially constitutive of that identity. It is not a means to a missional destination, but a ready participation in it.

Bibliography

Ammerman, Nancy T., ed. 1998. *Studying Congregations: A New Handbook.* Nashville: Abingdon.

Bosch, David J. 2011. *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission.* American Society of Missiology Series 16. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis.

Bourdieu, Pierre. 1977. *Outline of a Theory of Practice.* New York: Cambridge University Press.

Center for Congregations. 2020. "The Missional Network." Online. http://www.themissionalnetwork.com.

Church Innovations Institute. 2020. "What's God Up To?" Online. https://www.churchinnovations.org.

Croft, Steve, and Bob Hopkins. 2005. *Listening for Mission: Mission Audit for Fresh Expressions.* London: Church House.

Flett, John G. 2010. *The Witness of God: The Trinity, Missio Dei, Karl Barth, and the Nature of Christian Community.* Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

Fulkerson, Mary M. 2007. *Places of Redemption: Theology for a Worldly Church.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Gelder, Craig van, and Dwight J. Zscheile. 2011. *The Missional Church in Perspective: Mapping Trends and Shaping the Conversation.* Grand Rapids: Baker Academic.

Guder, Darrell L. 2015. *Called to Witness: Doing Missional Theology.* Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

———. 1998. *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America.* Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

Hagley, Scott. 2019. *Eat What Is Set before You: A Missiology of the Congregation in Context.* Skyforest: Urban Loft.

Henry, James D. 2018. *The Freedom of God: A Study in the Pneumatology of Robert Jenson.* Lanham: Lexington/Fortress Academic.

James, Christopher B. 2018. *Church Planting in Post-Christian Soil: Theology and Practice.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Jennings, Willie J. 2017. *Acts.* Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible. Louisville: Westminster John Knox.

Jenson, Robert W. 1997. *Systematic Theology.* Vol. 1. New York: Oxford University Press.

———. 1999. *Systematic Theology.* Vol. 2. New York: Oxford University Press.

———. 2014. *Theology as Revisionary Metaphysics: Essays on God and Creation.* Edited by Stephen J. Wright. Eugene, OR: Cascade.

———. 1978. *Visible Words: The Interpretation and Practice of Christian Sacraments.* Philadelphia: Fortress.

Keifert, Patrick R. 2006. *We Are Here Now: A New Missional Era.* Eagle, ID: Allelon.

Matthey, Jacques. 2001. "Missiology in the World Council of Churches: Update." *International Review of Mission* 90: 427–43.

Roxburgh, Alan J. 2011. *Missional: Joining God in the Neighborhood.* Allelon Missional Series. Grand Rapids: Baker.

Swart, Jannie, et al. 2009. "Toward a Missional Theology of Participation: Ecumenical Reflections on Contributions to Trinity, Mission, and Church." *Missiology: An International Review* 37: 75–87.

Scharen, Christian. 2015. *Fieldwork in Theology: Exploring the Social Context of God's Work in the World.* The Church and Postmodern Culture. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic.

Tanner, Kathryn. 1997. *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology.* Guides to Theological Inquiry. Minneapolis: Fortress.

Taylor, John V. 1972. *The Go-Between God: The Holy Spirit and the Christian Mission.* London: SCM.

Wacquant, Loïc. 2005. "Carnal Connections: On Embodiment, Apprenticeship, and Membership." *Qualitative Sociology* 28: 445–74.

Ward, Pete, ed. 2012. *Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography.* Studies in Ecclesiology and Ethnography. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

Welker, Michael. 1994. *God the Spirit.* Translated by John F. Hoffmeyer. Minneapolis: Fortress.

Wigg-Stevenson, Natalie. 2014. *Ethnographic Theology: An Inquiry into the Production of Theological Knowledge.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

———. 2013. "Reflexive Theology: A Preliminary Proposal." *Practical Matters* 6: 1–19.