

ARTICLE

Bending the Light: A Methodological Structure for Collaborative Theological Inquiry

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Abstract

The shifting structure of religious life requires new research methodologies that can attend to the dynamic nature of faith and resource ongoing scholarship and religious practice. Rather than approaching research and resourcing as separate and iterative movements, a contextually-centred approach can engage and support religious scholarship and practice in dynamic religious climates. While existing methodologies have advanced research and practice in considerable ways, these developments now make possible an integrative approach that combines research, resourcing and collaborative inquiry into a dynamic movement. This paper advances an argument through theological fieldnotes from a year of collaborative research and resourcing completed by the Program for the Future Church (PFFC). Established in 2021, the PFFC is a research, resource and relational hub that pilots solutions for emerging and pressing challenges before the Church. The methodology, “Bending the Light,” pursues collaborative action research by constituting three sites of inquiry: a Celebration, a Collaboratory and a Contextual Research Hub. Nine practices guide individual and collective investigation(s): 1) identifying present gifts; 2) creating connections; 3) identifying commonalities; 4) clarifying presenting crises; 5) developing shared language; 6) elevating individual and collective imagination; 7) complexifying anchoring concepts; 8) exploring shared practice; and 9) piloting research and resources. Combining reflections from conveners and participants, this methodological structure enhances attention to the lived theologies that ground the life of faith and the forms of practice that can resource future research and Christian practice.

Keywords: Action research, Collaborative inquiry, Future church, Methodology, Organizational innovation, Theological education

1 Introduction: Bending the Light¹

Mid-morning light shaped the site of the first Contextual Research Hub gathering convened by the Program for the Future Church (PFFC)² as a means to collectively explore the crisis of social disconnection and the realities of what that looks like in each participant's own ministry and personal context. As we crossed the threshold and entered a chapel in Waco, Texas, the space was illuminated from multiple points through lofted windows, stained glass, and the exterior light that followed us in through the door. The group of thirteen was met with silence upon entering, but the movement of light in the room transformed any reservation into resonance, welcoming us and beckoning us forward together.

The space was at once familiar, a chapel with pews organized to orient an audience toward the stage. "I know how this space works," reflected one participant. But amidst the recognizable elements, it also felt foreign. The pulpit, typically center stage, was relocated well off to the left. In its place were the participants, sitting on the stage rather than in the pews. Some were reminded as they looked up at the white Jesus gazing down from above, "This is not my space." The chapel context and physical structure of the environment was already forming and bending our thoughts, feelings, and time together.

This gathering and broader methodology engages in a practice described as "bending the light," drawn from Robinson's reflections on the practice of leadership (2009: 59–78). Robinson shares the story of a German professor who carried a found piece of glass in his pocket and began using it as a mirror to reflect light into dark spaces. "It became a game for [the professor] to get light into the most inaccessible places [he] could find." What began as a game grew to become a rule of life: the professor realized other sources of light – truth, understanding and knowledge – will only shine in dark places "if I reflect it." In a similar way, the work of the PFFC as a research, resource, and relational hub that pilots solutions for emerging and pressing challenges before the Church, seeks to reflect and refract possibility through the practice of gathering and collective engagement around shared crises. The structure and praxis within the "Bending the Light" (BTL) methodology consider how the combination of the convening practices of the PFFC and contextual engagement in a particular location with attention to participants' specific ministry circumstances

1 The Future Church Project grant from Lilly Endowment (Grant No. 2021 1146) supported this research. Co-authors are either personnel who oversee the project and activities or participants in the grant-funded programs.

2 The PFFC's co-founder, Angela Gorrell, played a significant role in establishing the initial organizational structure for this methodology.

impacts thoughts and actions. Through these fieldnotes from a year of collaborative research and resourcing completed by the PFFC, we aim to give an account of new ways of life that can emerge out of crisis and collaboratively bend the light of our individual and collective imagination toward hope.

The methodology expressed and embedded in this scene of gathering combines research, resourcing, and relationships into a single movement of collaborative inquiry. Following this introduction that purposefully starts *media res* (“from the middle”), we introduce this process of individual and collective inquiry as a methodological structure. Part II proceeds to describe the BTL methodology, identifying nine practices of discovery that guide individual and collective investigation across three sites of collaborative and contextual inquiry. Part III includes reflections from participants and co-authors in their own voice, grounding the theoretical framework within the lived experience of individuals who engaged in this collective inquiry over the course of one year. Finally, we conclude by exploring the theological significance of this particular mode of collaborative research, noting the importance of belonging, place and worship.

2 A methodological structure

The complexities of communities of faith require integrating theories, methods, and disciplines in order to give an account of the realities and possibilities of life together. While theology and theological education emerge from reflection on and in service of people of faith, it is often criticized for being disconnected from real world application. When theology and theological education remain abstract and theoretical, the lack of application can leave individuals and communities with limited guidance on how to address contemporary social, ethical, and moral challenges. There is a need, as Smith (2023) argues, for new forms to guide theological education and theological inquiry.

Methodology alone, however, cannot yield the encounter and formation that many of these communities, and theological education more broadly, desire. Structure is also required. Amid calls for new forms, the turn to structure provides a way to identify the properties, practices, and processes that can orient the methods and integrate the methodology in and for particular communities. Centering structure, or the particular physical, social, emotional, and spiritual conditions that surround gatherings, provides a way to combine insights from local communities and empirical research with theological reflection. This fieldnote demonstrates how social environments support the conditions for new ideas to form, and how these environments are, in turn, nourished by the ideas and values that infuse them with meaning. Like light

and a prism, theory and practice are inseparable from the structures they embody and make possible. Reframing the importance of structure acknowledges the transformative capacity of the relationship between theory and action by inviting attention to the conditions that enable individual and collective transformation, including the conditions for thriving as well as those that diminish life. It describes how organizations – and especially those endowed with sacred stewardship – are “living realities,” as Jennings (2020) observes, built on individuals’ affections, joys and desires for belonging. In its simplest form, thinking in terms of structure is like picking up the pieces of our lives and communities and creating space where enlivened imagination, birthed out of a sense of belonging, can form new structures where communities and individuals can flourish.

The BTL methodology builds upon and incorporates various insights and contextually-centered sensibilities that emerge from previous attempts to provide a theological account of the crises and responses that confront individuals and communities (e.g., Browning 1991; Osmer 2008; Bass et al. 2016; Scharen, 2015; Swinton and Mowat 2016; Cameron et al. 2010). Even as it incorporates some of the rhythm and style of existing methods, it also has a distinct manner that cannot be reduced to the logic of inquiry that the current modes of theological inquiry provide. Further, through the sustained practice of convening, it reconstitutes the forms of connection and belonging that are required for ministerial and ecclesial imagination to form and flourish. Hence, “Bending the Light” offers a methodological structure, an integrated theological research method, that can support the forms of discernment and collective action that cross silos within an ecclesial ecology (Benac 2022). The methodology purposefully includes and engages participants who inhabit different types of ecclesial institutions (e.g., congregations, theological schools, nonprofits), and the outcomes return to the local level, rather than remaining sequestered in academic institutions or the research community. As a result, as individuals and communities across this ecology discern how best to respond to a shifting organization landscape, the process and practices that ground this methodological structure can enrich the living theological imagination that animates theological education, local congregations, Church-related ministries and ecclesial entrepreneurship.

3 Outline of the methodology

Practical theology as a discipline explores the relationship between the conceptual learning of theology and doctrine and the actual lived experience of Christians on the ground. It offers an opportunity for individuals and communities to “see in depth” (Dykstra 2008: 48), drawn forth by the reality and possibilities of God. Nevertheless, the contextually-rooted and collaborative nature of this process resists linear

progression. Practical theology “is not linear but iterative,” Cahalan and Nieman note. “In its very methodology, practical theology must remain open to God’s future (Cahalan and Nieman 2008: 84). Similarly, through an iterative and imaginative process, BTL invites individuals and communities to see and name reality, as well as envision new possibilities for the future, again and again.

In this way, the methodology is one that not only connects the three aspects of the theological enterprise – action research, theological investigation and collaborative inquiry – but it also creates a collective imagination that is able to embrace new possibilities that shape the future of the Church. It not only attends to method but seeks to draw out the necessary structural conditions that form an alternative social structure where research, resourcing, and relationships can combine within an integrated and contextually-rooted theological research hub.

This methodology proceeds much like a light wave and a prism, rather than a singular, straight path. The research process moves like a wave, and the reconstituted sites of collaborative inquiry function like prisms. When light travels in the form of a wave and encounters a different medium, the spectral properties are affected; each wavelength is bent by a slightly different amount as they pass through the prism. This bending effect separates the incoming white light into its individual colors, creating a spectrum. In the same way, the “Bending the Light” methodological structure passes the “light” of collaborative inquiry through several different “prisms” to understand the substance and properties of the crises we encounter.

BTL works to create a new structure that illuminates and transforms communities through three grounding Properties: belonging, place, and worship. The combination of these Properties animates every aspect of the theological structure and the sites of collaborative inquiry are purposefully structured to include these three elements. When removed, the practices and processes described below lose coherence.

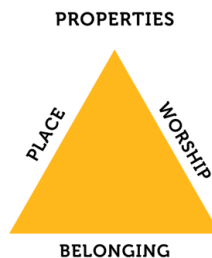


Figure 1 Properties of Bending the Light (commissioned by the Program for the Future Church)

Three sites organize the methodological structure: a Celebration, a Collaboratory and a Contextual Research Hub. These gatherings reflect an understanding of convening as a performative, practical theological inquiry (Benac, forthcoming a). As visualized below, the research process moves like an oscillating wave, elevating and anchoring the properties, practices, and people along the wavelength. Purposefully constituting new “situations” (Fulkerson 2007), these three sites of convening, grounded in the BTL Properties, act as a prism and become spaces that refract and redirect ideas, theory building, shared practices, and actions that follow. Just as the prism slows light waves and causes a refraction that illuminates the broad spectrum of colors, the prismatic gathering sites of the methodology are places where people slow down and consider their own contextually rooted gifts, challenges, and opportunities. This time of clarification and complexifying allows the different aspects, or colors, of the presenting issue to be reflected in a way that reveals new forms; theological imagination bends to open up new possibilities where hope emerges.

The methodological structure, grounded in the BTL Properties, is ordered by BTL Practices that guide the collective community. Across the three prismatic gathering points, nine practices guide the investigation: 1) naming present gifts; 2) creating connections; 3) identifying commonalities; 4) clarifying presenting crises; 5) developing shared language; 6) elevating individual and collective imagination; 7) complexifying anchoring concepts; 8) exploring shared practice; and 9) piloting research and resources. Together, this leads to a holistic exploration of theology and lived experiences.

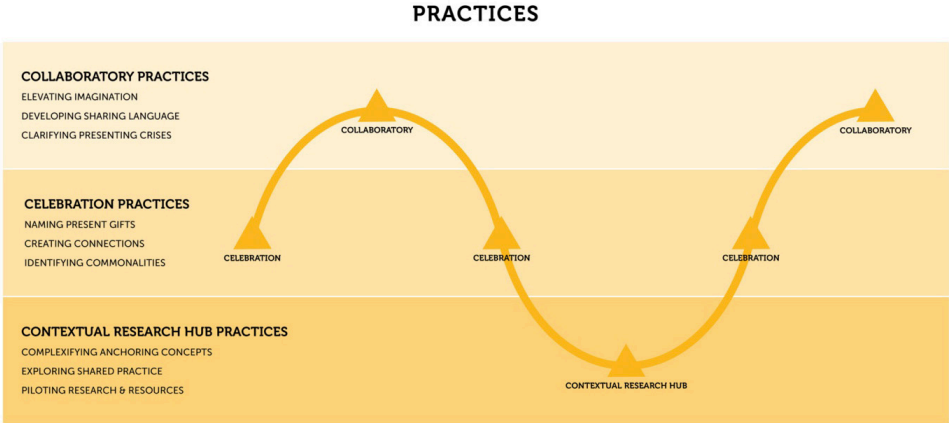


Figure 2 Practices for Bending the Light (commissioned by the Program for the Future Church)

From one prismatic gathering point, the process of inquiry continues along the wave, elevating or anchoring, until it meets another prismatic gathering site where it experiences another illumination, and so on. These new situations, which are at once theological and social, combine to create a method, a mode of convening, and a process for discovery that motivates and guides the work of transformation.

3.1 Celebration

The BTL methodology starts with celebration which orients individuals toward joy and toward God from the start. The anchoring practices of this prismatic point are naming present gifts, creating connections, and identifying commonalities to deepen the BTL Properties (belonging, place and worship). Celebration draws attention to the present and to the ways in which God has been and is at work by naming the gifts we have already received. At the same time, celebration is relational. Celebrations serve as vital moments of creating connection that affirm and build a sense of community. Just as the practice of marking seasons through the liturgical calendar orders movement through time, celebration marks these times in a way that illumines the holy-and-ordinary grounding for this work.

For example, this methodological work began with a Ministry Partner Gathering.³ The purpose was to bring people together to make connections and share and celebrate the ways in which God was at work in our surrounding community. This intentional time together involved creative exercises, conversation prompts and time for reflection and sharing. Here, people were introduced to other organizations and existing resources that began to provide a framework for future collaborative work.

Even as joys and hopes that anchored our time together, individuals also found commonality in current challenges being faced. By engaging with the concrete experiences of those gathered, the collective community was able to listen to stories, empathize with struggles, and share in the joys and the pains. As a prismatic point of Celebration, this gathering space immersed the community in the lived realities of the people and surfaced the collaborative connections present in the available networks as well bring to light shared hopes and challenges. Figures 3 and 4 represent participants' responses.

3 See "Program for the Future Church: Gathered," <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FiZBFv1kRfk>.

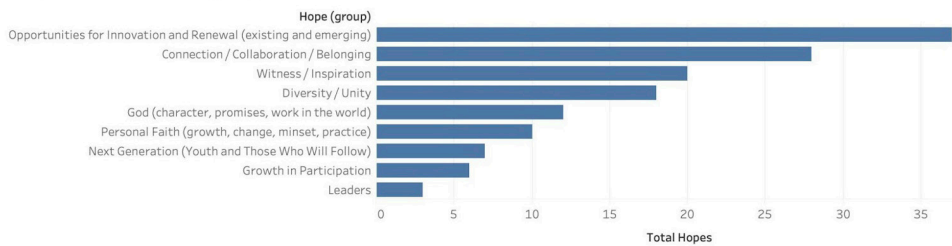


Figure 3 Ministry Partner Gathering “Hopes” (created by the Program for the Future Church)

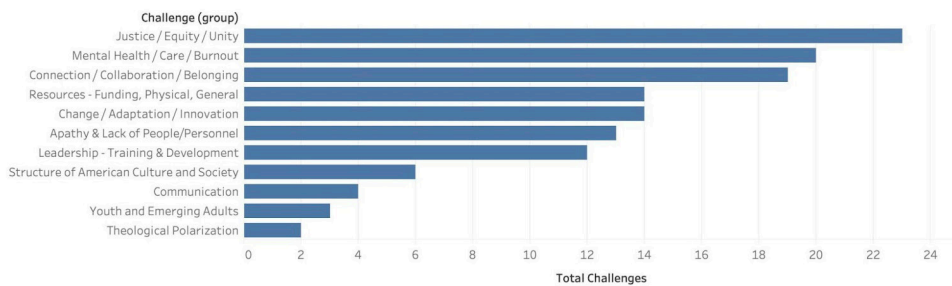


Figure 4 Ministry Partner Gathering “Challenges” (created by the Program for the Future Church)

Along with expanding networks, methodologically, this intentional gathering space invites opportunities to explore who resonates with your work. Starting with a collaborative convening of Celebration creates a shared story and allows people to connect not only with each other but also with the broader ethos of the community. By making connections and offering a vision for collective work, organizers aimed to create a hub of people who would be available to continue exploring together. This new collective energy, collaborative connections, and the information collected about current experiences is carried forward along the wave and directly informs the next gathering site: the Collaboratory.

3.2 Collaboratory

After identifying specific places of strength and encouragement, collaborative partners and communal challenges in our Celebration gathering, we brought these insights forward into the next convening point. The Collaboratory serves as a space for collective reflection, interdisciplinary and community connection, and the exchange of ideas around a particular challenge brought forth to investigate and illuminate. A Collaboratory can be thought of as a collaborative laboratory; a curated environment where church, community, and thought leaders are brought

together to work jointly on a particular presenting crisis or pressing challenge. Much as Osmer describes the work practical theology as starting, “where you are brought up short,” (Osmer 2008: 21), this work centers the crisis/es that bring individuals and communities up short and demand an account. For example, the first Collaboratory centered the crisis of social isolation and need for belonging, and our second Collaboratory will center the crisis of leading alone. In a Collaboratory, participants share resources, knowledge, and expertise to address complex problems and find innovative solutions. It is a catalytic gathering meant to help clarify presenting crises, develop shared language, and elevate individual and collective imagination.⁴

Participatory and inclusive, a Collaboratory embraces active engagement with all participants from various disciplines, sectors, denominations and organizations. The diversity of voices and perspectives enriches the collaborative process. Nevertheless, the second practice, developing shared language, is essential for collaborative inquiry. In a Collaboratory, participants are not a spectator; each person is a meaningful participant and contributor. The work being done is happening in and through the people in the room. Participants’ presence, ideas and experience have direct impact on the outcome. As collaboration unfolds, the participants develop shared language and concepts that facilitate clear communication and mutual understanding. Further, with the necessary research ethics approvals, the Collaboratory also doubles as a research site, providing a series of focus groups with participants.

And third, the Collaboratory elevates individual and collective imagination to envision innovative solutions and approaches that address the presenting crises. Accordingly, our work up to this point has purposefully curated environments where participants know at least two other people in the room, which allows them to have the relational support to imagine alternative futures. By facilitating collaborative partnerships and nurturing an environment of innovation and creativity, Collaboratories empower participants to drive meaningful and transformative change in their respective domains. The Collaboratory is an activator and generator, meant for dreaming and implementation, creation, and cultivation, designed to activate catalytic agents of change.

4 The language of “Collaboratory” was inspired by Kenda Dean’s work at Princeton Theological Seminary.

3.3 Contextual Research Hub

BTL proceeds to the Contextual Research Hub, which takes a deeper dive into the presenting issue and seeks to develop a more comprehensive and sustainable response. At this point, the three practices of discovery are complexifying anchoring concepts, exploring shared practices, and piloting research and resources.

In the Contextual Research Hub, participants delve into the anchoring concepts that underlie the presenting crisis. This involves exploring the root causes, underlying beliefs, and historical context that contribute to the challenges at hand. Second, the participants examine shared practices, traditions and community norms to better understand how they relate to the presenting crises. This exploration helps uncover potential leverage points for positive change. Third, the Contextual Research Hub pilots research initiatives, experiments, and interventions aimed at addressing the live issue. This includes testing potential solutions, evaluating their effectiveness, and refining strategies based on feedback. Guided by the insight of theological action research, this point of the methodology intends to stage and invite meaningful interventions in the communities the PFFC serves and the contexts participants inhabit.

Our Contextual Research Hub included faculty, students, local pastors, nonprofit leaders, and Baylor administrators, each of whom brought a unique perspective on the topic at hand. Being purposeful to think about the space, place, imagination and culture of belonging (Dykstra, 2008; Fulkerson, 2007; Benac, 2022), each week we met in a space that held meaning to one or more of the participants. The Contextual Research Hub gathered in four different places, each rooted in Waco, Texas: a community worshipping space, a 125-year-old chapel, a congregation turned nonprofit space, and a local startup accelerator. Participant feedback identified the formative function of these places. “We were able to move to different locations that allowed for us to refresh and concentrate on things we had not previously considered,” one participant shared. Another reflected: “I enjoyed being in different spaces and thinking through how that impacts our conversations.”

The interplay between shared texts and a shared context grounded our collective reflection. Three books guided our conversation during this Contextual Research Hub: Bonhoeffer’s *Life Together* (1995), Cohen’s *Belonging* (2022), and Birmingham and Simard’s *Creating Cultures of Belonging* (2022) provided prompts for our conversation. Centered in places and gathering around shared texts, we began each meeting by asking: What does belonging look like and feel like in this space? Our work together over this period aimed to develop shared resources (e.g. open access reading guides, edited volumes, new language for preaching, published articles, and toolkits) and pilot ideas that address the challenge of belonging in our own contexts.

3.4 Back to Celebration

The progression from a Celebration to Collaboratory to Contextual Research Hub and then back through Celebration reflects an integrated and participatory approach. Within this methodological structure, celebration is both a condition and an outcome. As Figure 5 represents, this methodological structure provides a pathway for interactive and ongoing individual and collective discovery.

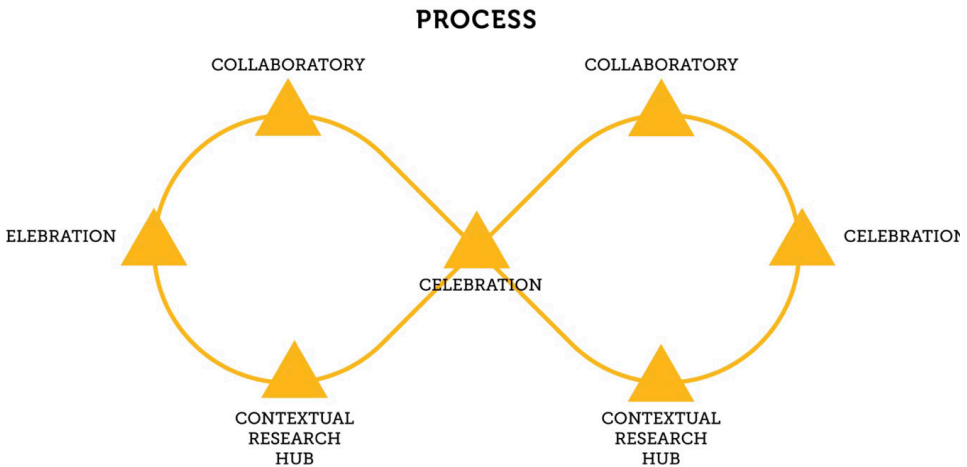


Figure 5 Bending the Light as process (commissioned by Program for the Future Church)

When pursued over time, BTL yields a dynamic and iterative feedback loop where each convening point symbiotically forms and transforms the individual and their organizations moving forward. Intentionally grounded in gatherings, this form of inquiry centers relationship and is rooted in the idea that gathering is a space of encounter, an act of resistance, and a place of creative possibility. When we come together, we encounter each other, and we encounter God. BTL reminds us that, after the ascension, the “locus of God’s presence” is found in the people of God (Coloe, 2021: 518). God is to be found in each of us; the more we come together, the fuller picture of God we see. Gathering is also an act of resistance; in a time when our lives and communities are being set by algorithms and divided by polarization, it involves inviting others from the outside to come in, and to be in spaces with people we would not normally gather with. Proceeding from each site of gathering, participants carry what they have experienced and continue to move along the wave. Each arc builds on the previous movement, and the cycle builds from one year to the next.

4 Collective Discovery: Participant Reflections

Following this introduction and description of the “Bending the Light” methodological structure, three individuals who have participated in portions of the methodology share their experience in their own voice. Their personal narration relationally grounds the movement of theory and praxis and elevates the embodied and contextually rooted reflection that grounds this collaborative work. The inclusion of participants as co-authors who are invited to write in their own voice reflects the methodological commitments of action research and the performative outcomes this approach to collaborative theological inquiry pursues.

4.1 Hannah Coe, Pastor

One of the more striking points of reflection for me as a participant in the PFFC Collaboratory and Contextual Research Hub is how much of my daily life as a pastor is oriented around the crisis of isolation and the PFFC’s chosen theme of belonging. Belonging is the common thread woven through most of my pastoral interactions. What started as a conversation that surfaced deeper questions and a desire to explore the realities of belonging progressed as the year continued. The concept of belonging, rather than becoming more clear, became increasingly complex in ways that felt deeply sacred and meaningful. I came to more deeply cherish celebrations of belonging. But, as the year progressed, I became attentive to the frequency of conversations in which people described painful experiences of broken belonging, and I became more attentive to my own experiences of broken belonging and how profoundly those experiences shaped me.

Recently, a member of my congregation and I worked together on an advocacy opportunity. She has experienced significant rejection and betrayal by the denomination of her youth because she is an advocate. As she reflected on the pain of rejection for doing what she felt was the right thing, I said, “I’m realizing that belonging is maybe more powerful than being right.” We sat in silence, the weight of this truth landing in a deep place. Even decades after the hurt, even when we know we’ve done the just and faithful thing, the longing to belong is a persistent ache; the absence of belonging, a painful void.

The experience of broken belonging has a way of making people feel as if the fabric of their lives is unraveling. The last few years of pandemic and crisis have felt like the Great Unraveling. Over the course of our Contextual Research Hub, when I stepped into the pulpit to preach and looked at the faces looking back at me, I began to think, “I wish you all could see that your experiences of broken belonging are perhaps the most powerful common thread you share.” I lamented my faith tradition’s emphasis on measures of belonging, too thin and shallow for the living of these

days. I wondered how gathering together our common threads of brokenness might mend our belonging.

Inspired by the Contextual Research Hub reading and conversation, I arranged for a small group Bible study of the Apostle Paul's Letter to the Galatians through the lens of belonging. We realized most of us were taught to read the epistles as systematic theology, not with the question, "How did early believers navigate questions of belonging?" We wondered how reading the Scriptures and interpreting our lives through the lens of belonging might be a source of healing and spiritual renewal.

Through my experience with the PFFC I had the opportunity to hear and learn about others' experiences of belonging and not belonging. This experience sprouted seeds of hopeful curiosity for me that common threads of belonging, especially the frayed and broken ones, are a source of healing and spiritual renewal for us all.

4.2 Tatum Miller, graduate student

The Contextual Research Hub centered on belonging allowed me to experience the nuances of different backgrounds and stories. To understand needs, I've learned that we must first understand people. How do we do that? Live life with one another. Carry each other's burdens. Then, we will learn what our communities truly need. Our methodology must start with people and not answers. Our communities are speaking but not many people are keeping their ear to the ground. When done right, relationships inform research, allowing for proper resourcing to occur. Research and resourcing must go hand in hand when working within the context of marginalized communities.

At the same time, it caused me to reflect on my own story of belonging. Even though our Contextual Research Hub was grounded in Waco, my belonging is largely wrapped up in my hometown. Louisville, Kentucky is one of the most segregated cities in America. The Eastside is populated mainly by white residents. Consequently, the West and Southside is made up of majority black residents. One in five black residents live in a place that is more than 75% black. Nearly half of the white residents live in a place that is at least 75% white. Drive through the West End and you will see soul food restaurants, entire families sitting on a neighbor's porch, and people smiling. You will hear the sound of 80s hip hop coming from the old timer's car and the occasional ambulance on its route. You will witness struggles, but also joys. Drive through the East End and you will find freshly cut grass, an abundance of electric vehicles, and Whole Foods. Louisville is also that place that I call home. These two communities are often at odds with each other due to distribution of resources. The East End has better policing, food access, infrastructure, and school systems.

The West End has failing schools, police brutality cases that make international news, and food deserts. A developed sense of home is required from belonging in the space between placement and displacement.

In the Contextual Research Hub, we explored different ways belonging can create spaces for opportunity. As a seminary student, my work in the Research Hub, organizing, writing and creating, directly impacted the way my education deepens my sense of belonging. Instead of looking inward, I turned outward to see that belonging can happen everywhere. When people feel like they can belong, communities begin to thrive. Resources and research are important but meaningless without the feeling of belonging. To those who feel rejected by the world around them, there will always be a gap that healthy grocery stores cannot fill. We need to start at the beginning, creating a space for everyone to find their place in this world of ours. The Contextual Research Hub helped me recognize that belonging starts in the grass roots. It's not the big moves, but the small moments that foster a feeling of belonging within our communities. From Waco to Louisville, displacement exists in an abundance. Fostering a sense of home can be the people we love and those who love us. Relationships are key to fostering belonging and must be made an ultimate priority. Celebration, collaboration, and contextual research have combined to provide an environment of flourishing and creative hunger. For me, educational belonging seeks to push me to new heights and take new risks. the Program for the Future Church has challenged many to dream big, while keeping our minds focused on the communities we serve.

4.3 Erin Moniz, College Chaplain

My entryway to this methodology was a Ministry Partner Gathering Celebration at a local community arts establishment. I had no expectations for the gathering and was curious about the existence of this venue that I was unaware of even though it was basically in my backyard. But I came to realize that bringing people together in intentional spaces that are connected to the local community was all part of the design for this project. The Ministry Partner Gathering situated me with friends and strangers. But through some accessible, collaborative, reflective activities, the gathering created a beautiful mosaic of ideas, hopes and challenges. This purposeful piece of art prompted open discussion and sharing, and was a glimpse of things to come, and the space, voices, diversity, creativity and candor were hallmarks of the entire experience.

There is a tendency in research methodology to rush towards outcomes and objectives. Being a part of the PFFC's BTL was a wholly different experience from other projects and research teams I have been a part of. While there were parameters

and expectations, this approach would prioritize embodiment and an invitation to an organic process. There was an integration of space and story. The objectives of celebration, collaboration and contextual engagement rang as more than a moniker slapped on conventional methods as it wove setting, stories, people, and posture into a tapestry of research on the topic of Belonging.

For the sake of productivity, it is easy to take for granted the synergy created in convening. This intentional hub of people was able to gradually complexify the anchoring concepts of Belonging by embracing the simplicity of abiding and engaging. For me, the concepts of Belonging moved from the abstract to the concrete as they were materializing in the very moments we shared as a research hub. This resulted, for me, in a series of reflections on my own ministry context. As a college chaplain and Director for Chapel, much of my work is to curate chapel experiences that orient and enrich the students' faith journey. Belonging is a metric that my team was already entrenched in as we created the new chapel model we were tasked to create for the University. We know that if, early on in their undergraduate experience, a student gains a sense of belonging, it greatly increases their chances of academic success and overall wellbeing at the University. But belonging is a difficult metric to create and track, and there are challenges in implementation. Belonging can be reduced to homogeneity. We do not wish for chapels to become echo chambers. The question I brought to each Contextual Research Hub gathering was, "How can I create an environment for student belonging without silo-ing demographics?"

One significant way this methodology has informed my own ministry is by demonstrating an embodied framework for group discovery. Our Hub allowed for diverse people and opinions to sharpen each other because the model, the invitation, and the very spaces we occupied, invited us to bring ourselves to the discussion while also welcoming how difference enhances our goals. As a result, I brought back an ecological framework for my team to consider with chapels. Belonging, spiritual formation and maturation are all difficult objectives to ensure. Instead of creating learning outcomes in an effort to synthesize these goals, we now approach our chapel model and the student experience as though we were gardeners instead of mechanics. We work to create environments that promote the best possibility for spiritual flourishing.

5 Theological Reflection: Bending Imagination Toward Hope

We purposefully describe the broader frame as a methodological structure for theological inquiry. Indeed, as described and embodied above, it is a process that guides individual and collective discovery, leading to research and resources that intend to support the current and next generation of faith leaders. The structure and process, however, offer more than rote production: it cultivates collective imagination that moves into the future with hope. Hope cannot always be quantified, and the enduring hope that nourishes a theological imagination extends beyond a single year of engagement together. Nonetheless, in this final section we want to expand on the three Properties of this methodological structure, and theological formation more broadly, that allow imagination to bend toward hope: belonging, place and worship.

Belonging is an essential condition for the formation of hope and imagination this methodological structure provides. While the English word “belonging” is not widely found in Scripture, the concept is. Our work over the course of this inaugural methodological cycle purposefully centered belonging because without it the relational connections that are required to nourish creativity, a common life, and imagination cannot form and flourish (Cohen 2022). Moreover, recent theological reflection about belonging (e.g., Jennings 2020; Barreto 2021) demonstrates the timeliness and relevance of translating the science of belonging into constructive social and theological proposal about the (re)ordering of a common life. The ongoing work of this methodological structure to bend imagination toward hope requires beginning with, building from, and working together in light of a structure of belonging. Representing a central property, subject of contextual reflection, and a theological condition, belonging is essential for and emanates from the BTL methodological structure.

The participant reflections and the broader community that gathered around this collective inquiry are animated both by a sense of and search for belonging. While individuals certainly experienced a sense of belonging through this work together, many of us also came to this conversation precisely because who did not always know who, where, or how to belong. “The longing to belong is a persistent ache,” Coe notes above. To put it differently, we each brought a people, but we were also in search of a people. We began our work together by noting how collaborative theological inquiry requires taking the risk of belonging, and over time we came to realize how theological imagination can neither form nor flourish without the risk of belonging. Theological imagination emerges from a sense of feeling safe, seen, and carried in the hands of others, but it also requires the ability to “see in depth” (Dykstra 2008: 48) in a way

that draws our common work together. And even as we seek to build structures of belonging, that longing for belonging may never fully abate.

Place is a second essential condition to bend imagination toward hope in and through this methodological structure. Much as with belonging, “place” is a category that provides an opportunity for contextual and interdisciplinary engagement. For example, Jennings (2010) notes how theological imagination forms in and through a relationship to place and land, and Fulkerson (2007) details how our contemporary constructions often render place as a commodity, rather than as a site of encounter. The work of this methodological structure similarly seeks to ground – quite literally – theological reflection within the particularities and complexities of place. It seeks to make familiar places feel slightly less familiar, and it aims to make unfamiliar places feel a little more like home. Moreover, the practice of convening performs an alternative social imaginary about what is possible through gathering and being gathered by God. As such, the three sites of convening, collaboration and collective discovery are reconstituted places that bend the light of imagination toward hope.

Our turn to place allowed our work to be grounded in the particularity of our local geography, while also drawing wisdom from our broader embodied experience. As Miller noted above, one of the outcomes of this contextually-centered collaborative inquiry was it brought to mind how people and communities in other places shape our theological imagination. Similarly, bending imagination toward hope requires seeing and acknowledging the realities of place and displacement. Place is more than a pragmatic consideration in the work of collaborative theological inquiry; it is an acknowledgement of our creatureliness as well as the reality that every place and community has structures that cultivate and inhibit belonging.

Finally, worship describes how the individual and collective work of this methodological structure are a doxological expression of lives lived in light of the reality and possibilities of God. God’s presence in time is the prime condition of possibility for theological inquiry and imagination about the future of theological education, the future of the Church, and Church-related ministries. As such, this individual and collective work begins and ends in celebration, or worship, seeking to discern and support the way of life that invites us to live as people of God and in the company of those God calls us to. The methodological structure that grounds and guides this work draws others into space of encounter through the alternative social reality of worship. Insofar as this process participates in God’s gathering, it seeks to draw individuals and communities into a doxological life of worship and service.

Worship is also a practice of celebration and anticipation. Accordingly, our work together was ordered by simple and ordinary practices: eating, naming gifts, and sending people out into the world. These times together also purposefully include rest. We gathered in traditional spaces of worship, such as chapels and congregations, but we also met in non-religious spaces, gathering in nonprofits, startup accelerators, classrooms, art galleries and public event spaces. And in a manner that was entirely unscripted, individuals who gathered began to incorporate belonging into the patterns of worship that order their lives and communities. “We do not wish for chapels to become echo chambers,” Moniz reflects above. This movement from celebration to anticipation emerges from a fabric of belonging and draws us forward, with hope, into the ways in which belonging may emerge more fully.

6 Conclusion

Several months after this initial gathering, one of the thirteen participants in this inaugural “Bending the Light” methodological structure shared a poem from Jan Richardson entitled “What the Night is For.” The poem begins by describing sorrow as “shattered glass.” It then wonders what account we give of these fragmented pieces of our lives and communities. As our work together noted, the longing for belonging is not something that can ever be entirely remade. And yet, Richardson suggests there is another way: scattering these fragmented pieces “into the soil, into the sky.” Rather than trying to pick them back up, we take the fractures and fragments – the very longings for belonging that make life together difficult to bear – and allow them to form a luminous witness in the dark. This is what the night is for, the poem notes: “it takes the broken things and sets them shining to light our way from here.”

The proposed methodological structure for theological inquiry, “Bending the Light,” bears similar witness. Just as the three participants described how they picked up and incorporated aspects of this methodology into their work, the combined methodological structures bends the light into individual lives and into local communities. It begins in the space of crisis, which often looks and feels like broken glass or shattered mirror, and follows a pathway to bend the light in order to give an account (Benac, forthcoming b). This structure consists of three Properties: belonging, place and worship that constitute three sites of inquiry: a Celebration, a Collaboratory, and a Contextual Research Hub with nine practices of individual and collective inquiry: 1) naming present gifts; 2) creating connections; 3) identifying commonalities; 4) clarifying presenting crises; 5) developing shared language; 6) elevating individual and collective imagination; 7) complexifying anchoring concepts; 8) exploring shared practice; and 9) piloting research and resources. When pursued over time and in

the company of others, it creates space for people and communities to imagine and pursue a hopeful future for the Church.

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