Theological reflection as a leadership development practice for the post-Christendom Scottish church:
Developing moral convictions and navigating new identities

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This paper is intended as a discussion about the role of theological reflection in church leadership development. In particular, we will discuss the organisational viability of a programme of theological reflection for leadership development, and the particular qualities which such a programme could foreseeably foster. This will be done with a particular focus on missional leadership and post-Christendom leadership. Theological reflection is a broad practice; Kinast describes it as the correlation of experience with theology which then shapes Christian practice.[1] This definition is appropriate for our purposes, although Thompson, Pattinson and Thompson's description of theological reflection as 'a process of coming to know God through reflecting on God's world'[2] is a helpful addition, as it makes greater intimacy with Christ the goal of theological reflection, as well as coherent Christian practice. As such, a leadership development programme which used theological reflection would equip new leaders to prayerfully and studiously re-understand their faith in light of their continued life experience. This might be achieved through a number of techniques, but a

helpful introductory approach would be the four stages of the pastoral cycle as described by Thompson, Pattinson and Thompson: individuals begin with a preconceived understanding of theology, encounter a situation which causes them to question that understanding, and then re-engage with Scripture and doctrine in the hope of reconciling or accommodating that experience, with the eventual goal being a fuller understanding of and relationship with Christ.[3] Bell describes this process of learning through experience as transformational leadership training which focusses on personal growth, and he contrasts it with a skills-based approach to leadership development which trains leaders to better perform specific tasks.[4] Indeed, my first experiences of theological reflection occurred at university, and contrasted with the task-oriented, skills-based learning I undertook when I was trained for lay leadership in the Scottish missional church.

The decline of Christendom as a socio-political reality presents the contemporary church with real challenges; challenges which will have implications for the ways in which churches train new leaders. At the most basic level, the waning of Christian societal influence will have led to a decline in public theological understanding; Vanhoozer recognizes this, and argues that in response pastors need to take up their vocation as public theologians, able to understand the concerns of the day and articulate a theological response to those issues within the community.[5] In this vein he argues that pastors need the skills to equip people with biblical literacy, which he defines as the ability to read one's own environment in relation to the long narrative of Christianity.[6] While there are merits to this approach, it is limited in scope because it views church leadership in terms of theological teaching and understanding. This point of view has been criticised by Hirsch and Catchim, who argue that the politically-established position of the church in Christendom has led to an unhealthy focus on pastoral and teaching giftings at the expense of apostolic and prophetic giftings which are necessary for innovation and growth.[7] This would suggest that the post-Christendom church must not only reckon with the changing societal landscape, but also the way Christendom shaped its own internal structures. Indeed, while discussing the decline of Christendom, Frost and Hirsch argue that the church in the West still understands itself through the lens of Christendom, despite the fact the narrative of Christendom is no longer descriptive of the relationship between the church and the world.[8] The implications of this perspective

are significant; it suggests that the changing relationship between the church and society requires that the post-Christendom church reflect upon its identity in light of that changed relationship. While Hirsh and Frost articulate this shifting relationship in terms of missional ecclesiology,[9] it can also be understood in ethical terms; Hauerwas and Willimon articulate the need for the church to exist as a community which is ethically distinct from secular society.[10] A helpful perspective in this discussion might be that of Fiddes, who uses an analysis of the epistles to Timothy to describe a picture of church leadership which incorporates both vision and oversight from apostles alongside theological teaching and guidance from teachers.[11] Fiddes draws a line between the *episkopos* mentioned in the letters and the contemporary idea of the ordained minister, arguing that they serve to equip and release the body of the church in ministry while maintaining a connection between the church and its tradition.[12] Such an understanding of leadership is well able to incorporate Vanhoozer's pastoral image of the public theologian, whilst also allowing for the conversation between tradition and context which is necessary for innovation and the shaping of contemporary Christian identity.

There are a number of reasons to believe that a transformative training approach utilising theological reflection would help churches to navigate these issues. Vanhoozer's description of public theologians incorporates elements of theological reflection, emphasizing the need for pastors to understand the theological significance of community experience.[13] This approach resonates with Kinast's description of theological reflection as the practice of making correlations between experience and tradition leading to practical implication.[14] Similarly, Fiddes' conception of ordained ministers as leaders who build connections between contemporary local churches and historical Christian tradition[15] necessarily implies the need for correlation between tradition and experience, as ministers ensure coherence between tradition, doctrine, history and contemporary practice. In my own missional context I have found these skills invaluable, as we have had to navigate the challenges of Christian expression in communities with little to no Christian presence. For example, when myself and some friends set out to form an expression of God's kingdom in gaming subculture, we quickly learnt that our most urgent questions had to do with the way we understood our Christian identity as it was expressed through gaming: how did we honour God as we participated in communal narratives? How did we carry ourselves with

grace while engaging in competition? These questions emerged out of challenging experiences and responding to personal growth in faith and theological understanding, as well as strategic and innovative practice.

Most significant however is the potential for theological reflection in developing leaders who are able to navigate the ethical responsibilities of the church in light of its new position in society. Gushee makes an important argument in this field, analysing the development of moral leaders throughout history and arguing that the path to moral leadership begins when a person acts on conviction which forms in response to a particular moral or theological impulse.[16] He goes on to describe a series of character traits that effective moral leaders develop over time.[17] What is particularly interesting about Gushee's approach is that, while he acknowledges the place of biblical understanding in the early formation of moral convictions,[18] the development of these convictions and the character qualities which allow them to be acted upon are viewed as the result of interplay between theology and experienced struggles.[19] This formation of conviction is something which I have experienced in my own practice since engaging actively in theological reflection practices; for example, working to set up online church groups for vulnerable and elderly church members not only helped me to better understand the challenges of inclusion in church communities, it helped me to develop greater conviction about the need for inclusive practice. This might suggest that training methods that utilise theological reflection are more likely to develop moral leaders who can act effectively on moral and theological convictions. Conradie, Tsalampouni and Werner demonstrate this sort of mindset when they argue that, in order to respond to our contemporary ecological crisis, churches should recommit to empowering young leaders through networks of ecumenical learning, reflection and communication.[20] This approach extends to church communities, who they argue should function as learning hubs which empower new lifestyles.[21] Indeed, transformational leadership training based on theological reflection seems particularly useful in empowering leaders to deal with emerging ethical issues such as the reshaping of church structures due to Covid-19, or the ongoing international discussion about racial justice and reconciliation, as the practiced ability to theologise contemporary experiences should help to generate leaders who are more responsive to new experiences and are thus able to respond to new situations with a greater degree of independence.

Having established the advantages of transformational leadership training, it is worthwhile to discuss the challenges of implementing such a programme. While a focus on transformation may help to develop qualities which church organisations find desirable, it will also present challenges to those organisations, particularly ones which are grounded in hierarchical management systems. Gushee observes that the path to moral leadership is one that by necessity challenges the status quo, and thus it requires the leader to challenge those who benefit from the current way of doing things.[22] In hierarchical settings, those stakeholders may well be power-holders within the church organisation. In those instances, theological reflection becomes a subversive tool which can undermine theological hegemonies that maintain power imbalances. This is something I have experienced while doing theological reflection; often, the inciting incident that leads to reflection is related to a problematic encounter which results from an insufficiency in the organisation's current approach. The resulting theological examination has on occasion led to my developing beliefs that are different, even contrary, to those of the leaders who I am working with. This can lead to conflict, unless there is a culture within the organisation which values the potential of experiential learning, in which case I have found the resulting conversation to be helpful and, in some cases, profoundly formative.

Bell identifies this issue, arguing that positional leaders need to embrace a cyclical understanding of experiencing, reflecting and learning if this system is to lead to renewal within an organisation.[23] Furthermore, Bell goes on to assert that the organisation will need to actively affirm experimentation and model a relational environment where workers can share their views with supervisors without anxiety.[24] This can create problems if positional leaders are reluctant to facilitate such a culture; while conducting a project designed to develop theological reflection in church boards, Olsen observed that pastors could function as gatekeepers who blocked cultural change because they felt ill-equipped to manage the discussion.[25] As such, any attempt to utilise theological reflection in leadership training needs to be accompanied by a willingness to undergo cultural change within the organisation, with the acknowledgement that fostering transformational development will create leaders with agency whose convictions may differ from those in positional leadership. This questioning may lead to formative experiences that unexpectedly change a leader's path of development; while engaging in church work in my own

congregation, there are times when I've had to contend with theological reflections that have challenged the convictions which originally caused me to become invested in the church, and consequently my view of my ongoing service in that community. Experiences such as my own present a risk to church organisations, particularly smaller ones; for example, if trainees experience personal transformation to such a degree that they can no longer fulfil their callings or convictions within the organisation which delivered the training. However, they also raise important questions about the way we train new leaders; namely, do we train leaders to serve our own communities, or to be released for service into the wider kingdom of God? This is a difficult question, but also an urgent one. As a young leader in the Scottish church, and as someone who has discipled young leaders in different church contexts, I have witnessed first-hand the tensions that occur when trainee leaders move on from their home communities, a process which too often becomes hostile. I have observed some instances where young leaders have presented questions which their communities are either ill-equipped or unwilling to answer. In other instances, the leader's choice to move on can be seen as a rejection of that community; I have both felt this personally and provided pastoral support in communities which have experienced real hardship as the result of leadership transition. Investing in theological reflection is likely to impact these situations, as it requires both trainee leaders and organisations to recognise the validity of the experiences which lead to these shifts and actively incorporate them into the process of growth and change. Having recently experienced grief as the result of a leadership transition, my own reflection on the matter was that if I truly recognise those churches who received new leadership as authentic expressions of the kingdom of God, then it is incumbent upon me to embrace that which leads to their benefit, even if it should come at the expense of my own community. As such, churches will have to reckon with the possibility that the leaders they are training may not remain with them and decide how important that is to them.

In summary, theological reflection may be a helpful training tool for churches as they navigate the challenges of post-Christendom existence, as long as those churches are structured to accommodate the sort of independent thinkers which this method may generate. Theological reflection will likely develop leaders as better public theologians, apostolic leaders, and most of all ethical individuals. Furthermore, theological

reflection will equip leaders to be responsive to new situations and bridge theological gaps between traditions and contemporary experience. Investment in this sort of training initiative will require organisations to adjust their working cultures in order to foster experimentation and open communication. Positional leaders are especially important in this process, and their willingness to facilitate such a learning culture will be pivotal in the success of that programme. Used well, transformative leadership training through theological reflection could be an effective tool in challenging existing hegemonies of power within the church, but this will require church organisations to adopt an outward-facing approach, being willing to train leaders for service within the kingdom of God as it exists beyond their own borders.

Notes

[1] Robert L. Kinast, *What Are They saying About Theological Reflection?* (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 2000), 1.

[2] Judith Thompson; with Stephen Pattison and Ross Thompson, *SCM Studyguide to Theological Reflection* (London: SCM Press, 2008), 57.

[3] Ibid., 22 f.

[4] Skip Bell, "Learning, Changing and Doing: A Model for Transformational Leadership Development in Religious and Non-profit Organizations", *Faculty Publications*, Paper 6 (2010): 95.

[5] Kevin Vanhoozer, "The Pastor as Public Theologian", in *Becoming a Pastoral Theologian: New Possibilities for Church Leadership*, ed. Todd Wilson and Gerald Hiestand (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2016), 38, 41.

[6] Ibid., 44.

[7] Tim Catchim and Alan Hirsch, *The Permanent Revolution: Apostolic Imagination and Practice for the 21st Century Church* (San Francisco: Josey-Bass, 2012), 17.

[8] Mike Frost and Alan Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come: Innovation and Mission for the 21st-Century Church* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 2013), 21 f.

[9] Ibid., 22.

[10] Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Colony: A Provocative Christian Assessment of Culture and Ministry for People Who Know That Something is Wrong* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abbingdon Press, 1989), 78 f.

[11] Paul S. Fiddes, *A Leading Question: The Structure and Authority of Leadership in the Local Church* (London: Baptist Publications, 1986), 31.

[12] Ibid., 33.

[13] Vanhoozer, "The Pastor as Public Theologian", 42.

[14] Kinast, *What Are They Saying About Theological Reflection?*, 1.

[15] Fiddes, *A Leading Question*, 33.

[16] David Gushee, "The Path of Moral Leadership", in *Baptist Peacemaker* 32.4 (2012), 7.

[17] Ibid., 8.

[18] Ibid., 7.

[19] Ibid., 8.

[20] Ernst Conradie, Ekaterini Tsalampouni and Dietrich Werner, "Manifesto for an Ecological Reformation of Christianity: The Volos Call", in *Eco-Theology, Climate Justice and Food Security: Theological Education and Christian Leadership Development*, ed. Dietrich Werner and Elisabeth Jeglitzka (Geneva: Globethics.net, 2016), 105.

[21] Ibid.

[22] Gushee, "Path of Moral Leadership", 8.

[23] Bell, "Learning, Changing and Doing", 107.

[24] Ibid., 110 f.

[25] Charles M. Olsen, *Transforming Church Boards into Communities of Spiritual Leaders* (Washington, D.C.: Alban Institute, 1995), 71.