

THE PRIORITY AND PRACTICE OF CHURCH RECONCILIATION:
CULTIVATING INTER-CONGREGATIONAL TRUST IN A CITY
CONTEXT

by

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ABSTRACT

“The Priority and Practice of Church Reconciliation: Cultivating Inter-Congregational Trust in a City Context”

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This dissertation is a work of practical ecclesiology with a focus on city Church unity from a Free Church perspective. It is a practice-led initiative which aims to distill theological insights from the experience of working with the TrueCity network of congregations in Hamilton, Ontario. It argues that congregations play a crucial role in how God deepens and enriches Church unity and that the relational space between congregations is a crucial locus where this happens through the development of inter-congregational trust. This is at the heart of the process of Church reconciliation.

The problem this dissertation addresses is how to best understand the way in which enriched unity developed between the congregations that have been part of the TrueCity network. The trust that has developed between these congregations has made Church unity a more tangible reality. The foundations for a theology of Church reconciliation are put forward highlighting the priority Church unity is given in the New Testament; looking at how Church unity is understood to be in process; laying out how the nature of the unity God intends is differentiated; and observing God’s call to join

with him in his reconciling work, a key frontier of which is reconciliation within the Church.

Through using a critical realist grounded theory methodology, a five-phase boundary spanning process theory is put forward which explains how inter-congregational trust develops by prioritizing practices which embed trust in congregational cultures. When such inter-congregational trust is cultivated, the calling to pursue Church reconciliation is engaged. Understanding this boundary spanning process equips congregations to better join with the Spirit's work of pursuing Church reconciliation in specific locales so that a more robust catholicity comes to characterize the Church in those places. One in which differentiated unity continually broadens the wholeness and deepens the fullness of the Church in a city.

DEDICATION

In memory of my mother Sandra Witt who always believed I had this in me

and

*To all the TrueCity boundary spanners who built trust across differences, counting the
cost of courageously leading the congregations they represent into the process of*

Church reconciliation

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

For the past twenty years I have worked with a network of congregations in Hamilton, ON, which in pursuing the goal of being “churches together for the good of the city” have experienced Church unity in deep and unexpected ways.¹ Influenced by input from the Missional Church Movement, a group of congregations began to explore how they could shift their core identity toward a missional posture of being congregationally called to join God in his mission.² Together these congregations have found ways to learn from each other, celebrate stories of God’s faithfulness, and collaboratively engage in mission. The openness to collaboration with other similarly motivated congregations which came as part of this shift in ethos towards a missional framing, introduced us to an active mode of pursuing Church unity through inter-congregational partnerships. As congregations participated in the network, trust grew between their leaders and between the congregations themselves. Over time we became aware that one

¹ I have chosen to capitalize the word “Church” when using it to refer to the broader entity that is inclusive of multiple local assemblies which are also commonly called churches. To avoid confusion and in keeping with my Free Church ecclesiological framing, I will primarily use the word “congregation” to refer to these local assemblies. While I recognize that there are other streams of the Church which do not frame these local assemblies as congregations, I will make a case in Chapter 4 of this dissertation for understanding all such local assemblies in this way.

² I am working from the definition of the Missional Church Movement offered by Christopher Schoon, who frames it as having five central characteristics, “the centrality of the Trinitarian God’s missionary character (*missio trinitatis*); an understanding of the church as being sent as participants in God’s mission; the essential nature of an incarnational mission dynamically expressed in locally contextualized ministry; the assessment that the church’s privileged position within Christendom has come to an end, resulting in an opportunity for the church to embody a servant identity; and a commitment to a holistic gospel aimed at the reconciliation, restoration, and flourishing of all things in Jesus Christ.” Schoon, *Cultivating*, 19–20.

of the results of the process of developing missional collaborative capacity was the growth of inter-congregational trust. This trust came to be understood as the most vibrant marker of the enriched unity we were experiencing, and central to the process of Church reconciliation into which the Spirit was leading us. This has led to the conclusion that a key dimension of Church unity is the development of trust between congregations that share the same geography, and that the development of such trust is core to the process of Church reconciliation.

Looking back on this process we recognize now how shared mission created trust which developed into network partnerships which embedded the trust into congregational cultures. In the process a more vibrant, substantive unity resulted. The regularly expressed surprise by those on the outside looking in at how congregations from different denominations in different parts of the city were working together, made us aware that something more significant than good collaborative mission was happening. I have come to understand that the Spirit leads congregations to cooperate in ways that deepens trust between them and in the process strengthens Church unity if they are open to participate. The priority of this process of Church reconciliation and the trust which characterizes it is not adequately recognized, and how to keep in step with the Spirit in practicing it is not sufficiently understood.

There has been resistance to this process all along the way which has made clear that the more robust unity resulting from collaboration has cut across deep-seated sectarian paradigms which equated unity with compromise. This resistance has come both from within the congregations involved and from other congregations which rejected involvement. We naively expected such resistance to diminish as the fruit of

collaboration became more obvious but have eventually come to recognize the need to develop specific practices to address the brokenness to which this resistance points. This dissertation writing process has led me to understand this dynamic in terms of the need for Church reconciliation.

Church unity matters deeply to God in all its various forms. Pursuing it through the process of Church reconciliation between congregations in a city context is important but has been under-conceptualized. Congregational life is the most ubiquitous social expression of what it means to be the Church, and so unity between congregations represents an important frontier for living out this Christ-initiated objective.

The problem this dissertation addresses is the lack of attention given to Church reconciliation on the ground in congregational settings and the diminished imagination for how to put this scriptural priority into practice. It explores how a group of congregations with sectarian roots engaged in Church reconciliation, overcoming their aversion to associate with other significantly different congregations. It is the contention of this dissertation that there is a broader sense of Church which can be described as the ecclesial ecology of any and every context where the Church has taken root.³ Within this ecclesial ecology congregations are not the only structures, but they are central and the relationships between them are important. So the way in which congregations in a locale relate to each other has a tremendous impact on the state of the unity of the

³ “Ecclesial Ecology” is a term introduced by Dustin Benac in his book *Adaptive Church*. He describes it as “the constellation of identifiable forms of organized, ecclesial life, such as congregations, theological schools, Christian colleges and universities, philanthropic centers, and nonprofits, as well as experiments and expressions of creative deviance that take place in the boundary spaces between existing and emerging orders.” Benac, *Adaptive Church*, 8.

Church in that place. There is a resistance to pursuing more robust Church unity in most settings which can be seen in the way congregations fail to engage with each other. The evangelical propensity to understand inter-congregational relationships as at best a secondary matter and at worst an issue of compromise, impoverishes worship, formation, and witness. This is a particularly glaring problem for congregations pursuing a missional vision which seeks to participate in God's desire to reconcile all things to himself in Christ by the work of the Spirit.

Church reconciliation is the Spirit-led process whereby Christians work out the implications of the gospel in a way that breaks down the dividing walls of hostility present within the Church. One important way this process is engaged takes place when trust develops between congregations. This dissertation's thesis is that there is an identifiable inter-congregational trust building process which is central to the theological priority of Church reconciliation and for which trust embedding congregational and pastoral practices can be identified. This dissertation maps out this boundary spanning process which leads to increased inter-congregational trust and identifies the pastoral and congregational practices which make such a process possible. Further, it is contended that the process of inter-congregational trust development happens most powerfully in local networks where diverse congregations have a context for connecting. How this can happen effectively will be explored in the following pages.

Practice Specific Background

This study is a practice-led research (PLR) project. PLR is described as research which is initiated in practice.⁴ It is research “concerned with the nature of practice and directed towards generating new knowledge that has operational significance for that practice.”⁵ This research project has its origins in the recognition of a dynamic in the way congregations were relating which emerged amid my practice of facilitating missional collaboration. The collaboration both required and resulted in a more robust quality of unity. Church unity was not the objective primarily being pursued when the TrueCity network was initiated, but it quickly became a motivating attribute.⁶ Despite many challenges, a quality of unity has developed which people recognize as deeper and richer than what they have experienced before. The question of which practices created this quality of unity and whether these practices can be engaged more fully is what generated this project. These questions emerged from within my practice.

The primary professional experience which informs this research is my work developing and facilitating the TrueCity network. I arrived in Hamilton in 1998 after ten years of church planting mission work among the urban poor in Manila, Philippines. My experience in foreign missions equipped me to assist congregations as they began to consider what missionally engaging their Hamilton context might look like. After working with several congregations in Hamilton from 1998–2004, three of those congregations asked me to help them develop their ability to collaborate. This led to the launch of TrueCity.

⁴ Gray, “Inquiry Through Practice,” 3.

⁵ Candy, “Practice Based Research,” 3.

⁶ Collaboration in specific areas of mission was what initially catalyzed the TrueCity network. The primary motivation was to see each of the congregations involved engage in more and better mission.

I describe my practice with the categories of scanning, convening, and reconciling. The scanning aspect has me meeting with leaders of various congregations in a variety of settings, paying special attention to where creative mission is being pioneered and where faithful missional involvement is sustained over time. I pay attention to the personality and gifting of the different congregations, discerning how this leads them to missional engagement. This work of scanning also has me paying attention to the predisposition of the pastor and other key leaders towards cooperative mission. The convening aspect of my practice has me bringing groups from these various congregations together around topics of interest to explore opportunities for informal cooperative resourcing and occasional, formal collaborative events or projects. The reconciling aspect leads me to recognize and work to break down barriers which keep leaders and congregations from respecting, connecting, and collaborating with each other. These barriers range from personality differences to bad history to negative stereotypes held by one tradition or ethnicity about another.

The TrueCity network started in 2004 when three churches in Hamilton, ON began to explore how they could collaborate to grow in their missional engagement. Over the first year, out of reflection on Jeremiah 29, we settled on the name TrueCity to recognize that God desires the full flourishing of particular places and calls the Church to join in pursuing what is good and best for each place. In our context that was the city of Hamilton. This was further articulated in our aspirational tagline of, “churches together for the good of the city.” We held a conference and found it a powerful vehicle for both bringing more people in our congregations together and making space for other congregations to explore involvement. We have held a conference each year since.

These gatherings continue to create space where together we can engage contextually relevant themes, start and further develop relationships, share stories, and learn from each other.

By the beginning of the second year three more congregations had joined the network. We developed regular rhythms to bring pastors and other congregational leaders together. This led to cooperative engagement in outreach initiatives such as volunteering in neighbourhood schools, welcoming refugees, walking with those facing mental health challenges, engaging the arts community, caring for creation, youth ministry, Indigenous reconciliation, and other such ventures. We have come to refer to these as *missional frontiers*. The innovation was to recognize all these ventures as collective mission even though the various congregations involved did not engage all these frontiers. We have found that together we can better engage a growing number of these frontiers if each of our congregations identifies and focuses on a few of them.

This has not been a panacea. Discerning which frontiers to focus on and how to sustain engagement remains a work in progress for all the congregations involved, especially as we have navigated the COVID pandemic and the reality that is emerging in its aftermath. Finding effective ways to do evangelism as part of our missional engagement remains challenging, as does sustaining intentionality in how we pursue discipleship in the midst of mission, but we continue to face and engage these challenges together. In all of this, the congregations involved in TrueCity challenge each other to work from the understanding that they are joining God in his mission. I believe this has been key to the pursuit of Church reconciliation and the larger sense of Church that has taken root.

The TrueCity network created a context where congregations whose traditions were steeped in suspicion induced sectarianism, learned to work together. The level of commitment to collaboration represented a significant broadening of horizons. By initially adopting an evangelical statement of faith, we provided sufficient reassurance to open the way for pursuing collaborative mission. As one of the pastors involved in the founding of the network commented early in its development, “You know God is at work when churches that have defined themselves by who they do not associate with begin to work together.” This is intriguing given how limited the diversity of the congregations involved at the time was. It speaks to how challenging it is to develop tangible expressions of unity for evangelical churches.

There is a recognition within parts of evangelicalism that there is a need to repent of the divisiveness which too often characterizes the relationships between congregations of different denominations.⁷ This usually takes the form of evangelical-exclusive networks where different congregations and ministries that identify as evangelical find ways to work together.⁸ Only if those from other traditions can ascribe to evangelical doctrine is there an openness to including them. The genesis of the TrueCity network fits into this trend, but because we also were engaged in the broader Missional Church Movement, we felt led to take the Church reconciliation work further by considering the possibility of our network including congregations which did not specifically identify as evangelical. Ten years into the network’s history, we moved from using an evangelical statement of faith as our doctrinal filter, to centering around

⁷ Chan, *Until Unity*, 19.

⁸ Working from a “city reaching” paradigm, organizations such as Movement Day, City Gospel Movements, and City to City all exist to encourage and facilitate collaboration between evangelical churches. See for example Keller, *Serving a Movement*.

the Apostle's Creed. We agreed that congregations which could affirm the creed and were intent on engaging missionally could be involved. As this broader group of congregations cooperatively engaged various missional initiatives, the experience and practice of unity went deeper among leaders and broader across congregations. It became a compelling witness.

In contrast to, and tension with this Church reconciliation work, we have consistently bumped up against detractors who believed greater doctrinal alignment and practice should be required for congregations to be in relationship with each other. Early on, a theologian who was part of one of the congregations involved was accused of believing in Open Theism. Some congregations in the city cited this as a reason for not getting involved. A few years later, questions around women in leadership and the place of charismatic gifts created tension. More recently it has been differences in posture towards the involvement of the LGBTQ+ community which has created tremendous challenge. Despite the fruit which deeper unity has brought, or maybe because of it, there is a suspicion of compromise. This has made clear that the doctrinal significance of Church unity and the Church reconciliation practice that creates it has not been adequately grasped or lived out within evangelicalism. By researching how trust developed between congregations in this network and how it pointed to the Church reconciliation that was taking place, this dissertation aims to address this deficiency.

Practical Theology

This project is a work of Practical Theology with a particular focus on practice-based ecclesiology.⁹ A theory has been put forward for how identifiable pastoral and congregational practices can build inter-congregational trust through a boundary spanning process thereby faithfully engaging the calling to Church reconciliation. It unpacks the lived experience of pastors and other congregational leaders involved in missional church networks primarily in Hamilton.

Practical Theology is a multi-faceted academic discipline which includes a vast array of perspectives on how it can best be defined, and which methodologies are best suited to its goals.¹⁰ This dissertation works primarily from Swinton and Mowat's definition and methodological approach. They define Practical Theology as "critical, theological reflection on the practices of the Church as they interact with the practices of the world, with a view to ensuring and enabling faithful participation in God's redemptive practices in, to and for the world."¹¹ This project reflects critically and theologically on how trust developed between congregations involved in the TrueCity network as they pursued missional engagement in their context and how this relates to the priority that scripture gives to Church unity and the practice of Church reconciliation necessary to realize it.

Swinton and Mowat contend that what connects the various streams of Practical Theology is a concern with *situations* and *practices* and how these integrate with the commitment to theological reflection. Situations make up life and create experiences.

⁹ Practice-based ecclesiology is Clare Watkins term used to describe a way of pursuing the study of the Church from within practical theology. See Watkins, *Disclosing Church*, 4.

¹⁰ Miller-McLemore, "Five Misunderstandings," 20.

¹¹ Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology*, 7.

They are complex and layered. All of the nuances are not naturally taken in and the variations that are present in any given situation are not recognized. Swinton and Mowat advocate complexifying the exploration of situations in order to mine the connections and meaning that are present.¹² The situation which has given rise to the TrueCity network contains a vast array of dynamics which impact on how congregations have come to trust each other. To understand the theological implications of what has taken place requires rigorous study and reflection using both social science and theological tools.¹³

Getting a handle on what is meant when the term *practice* is used is vital to Practical Theology and to this research project. Swinton and Mowat emphasize the need to recognize the value-laden nature of practices and the theoretical dimension which can be engaged by paying attention to the values and theologies being lived out within those practices.¹⁴ They contend that all practices are communal and social in nature, and continue on to say that if one considers them Christian practices they will participate in Christ's redemptive mission in some way. They conclude by highlighting how Christian practices "must always be understood within the context of the Church and the reign of God rather than in narrowly individualistic terms."¹⁵ Recognizing the way that practices are a part of life is deeply important to this project given the goal of identifying pastoral and congregational practices which build inter-congregational trust.

The need to dig below the surface of situations and practices leads to a recognition of the provisional usefulness of qualitative research methodologies as a way

¹² Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology*, 12–16.

¹³ Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology*, 16.

¹⁴ Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology*, 19.

¹⁵ Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology*, 23.

of seeing life from a different vantage point to discover new patterns of relationship in the social world. Like Practical Theology, qualitative research recognizes the complexity of life. It seeks to provide systematic ways of surfacing the meaning which underlies that complexity. This project uses a critical realist grounded theory qualitative research methodology. Grounded theory focuses on analyzing processes or actions.¹⁶ It interweaves data gathering and research analysis using an iterative process which abductively moves back and forth between the two.¹⁷ For this project it involved doing semi-structured interviews with congregational leaders participating in missional networks; coding transcripts of the interviews; developing categories which then were used to do another round of coding; doing follow up interviews; and developing theoretical insights. The objective being to develop a theory of how inter-congregational trust producing practices can fruitfully be engaged as part of the call to pursue Church reconciliation based on the data which has emerged from the research.¹⁸

Critical Realism

Qualitative research is only provisionally useful because the epistemological paradigms which undergird these methodologies can be at odds with theological commitments. It is therefore crucial to recognize the range of philosophical postures from positivistic assumptions that value-free truth is directly knowable to social constructionist perspectives that question the knowability of truth and believe that all meaning is socially negotiated. The critical realism which is foundational to this research project

¹⁶ Creswell and Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry*, 83.

¹⁷ Charmaz, *Constructing*, 1.

¹⁸ Corbin and Strauss, *Basics of Qualitative Research*, 7.

aims to find a middle ground which is consistent with the theological convictions which undergird this project.

The critical realism being drawn on for this project has its origins in the work of Roy Bhaskar as a philosophy of science. It has three main commitments. The first is to ontological realism. It contends that there are entities and processes in the world that exist beyond being known. This is the commitment to *realism*. It advocates the perspective that reality cannot and will not ever be fully known.¹⁹ Critical realism holds that ontology cannot be reduced to epistemology.²⁰ This is captured in what Bhaskar called the *epistemic fallacy* which critiques the tendency of both positivism and social constructionism to limit reality to what is knowable. The second commitment which follows from this is to epistemological relativism, contending there is no one right epistemological foundation which fully captures reality. Reality is known in part, and it is not certain what parts are rightly understood. All truth claims need to be put forward provisionally and with humility as an honest effort to describe what is ultimately beyond description. The third commitment is to judgemental rationality. Not all epistemologies have an equally valid view of reality. Some have a better understanding than others, but none know fully. It can be rationally judged which epistemological commitments match more fully with reality. But ultimately only by bringing epistemological convictions into dialogue can progress be made toward a better, fuller understanding of reality.²¹

¹⁹ Root, *Christopraxis*, 193.

²⁰ Wright, *Christianity and Critical Realism*, 13.

²¹ Root, *Christopraxis*, 230.

In keeping with these commitments, critical realism holds that reality is stratified into three layers—the empirical, the actual, and the real.²² The empirical is the realm of personal experience. At this level events and objects can be measured as they are experienced, but the ability to capture them fully is epistemically limited.²³ The actual is the middle layer. It is made up of the totality of the way objects and structures interact, much of which is beyond human perception.²⁴ The third layer is the real. It is where the causal mechanisms exist which generate the interactive events in the actual layer which make possible the experiences perceived in the empirical layer.²⁵ This layered conceptualization of reality makes it possible to go beyond the flat equivalences which positivism makes between what is experienced and what is real without capitulating to a social constructionist position which denies a reality beyond the experience of it. The goal of theorizing is to describe as best as possible how what is experienced at the empirical level is the result of what is happening at the actual level and what is causing this effect at the real level.

Given that critical realism is a newer philosophical perspective which only began to be framed in the 1970s, the work of developing qualitative research methods which leverage the powerful insights it opens is still in its early stages. Those who are working from a critical realist perspective in doing qualitative research recognize that there will not be one right methodology to apply critical realism, but rather multiple methodologies are needed.²⁶ Grounded theory is one methodology which is proving to

²² Fletcher, “Applying Critical Realism,” 183.

²³ Wright, *Christianity and Critical Realism*, 67.

²⁴ Fletcher, “Applying Critical Realism,” 183.

²⁵ Wright, *Christianity and Critical Realism*, 67.

²⁶ Hoddy, “Empirical Research,” 121.

be useful in this regard. Though early forms of grounded theory tended to have a positivistic bent in their commitment to a purely inductive process which eschewed being informed by existing theory, more recent developments in its use have made space for theory-informed applications with a more abductive posture.²⁷ And while some like Fletcher have expressed reservations about whether a grounded theory methodology can be adapted to a critical realist perspective, others like Hoddy have shown how grounded theory does in fact have the range to provide a robust research methodology from out of a critical realist framing.²⁸

Swinton and Mowat argue that as important and helpful as qualitative research can be in doing good Practical Theology, there is a temptation to let it displace theology as central to the discipline.²⁹ Critical realism has the range to respond to this concern by letting qualitative research inform the work while keeping theological discourse in the central role in how it frames reality. Critical realism is not only consistent with a Christian worldview but has proven a powerful framework for mapping out theologically robust ways forward on a number of fronts from the relationship of science and faith to a realist hermeneutic of scripture.³⁰ By recognizing that God's existence is part of the real layer beyond what can be fully conceptualized, a critical realist framing can rightly understand theological work as epistemologically limited attempts to best capture what is real and then explore how those perspectives get worked out at the levels of the actual and empirical. It has the potential to provide a

²⁷ Oliver, "Critical Realist Grounded Theory," 378.

²⁸ Fletcher, "Applying Critical Realism," 186, and Hoddy, "Empirical Research," 114.

²⁹ Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology*, 83.

³⁰ Wright, *Christianity and Critical Realism*, 39–55.

robust way forward in practical theology's on-going quest to find an integrative way of studying both human experience and theology.³¹

Theological Framework

The theological framework for this project sets the importance of Church unity within the context of a missional Free Church ecclesiology. It argues for the primacy of each particular congregation, while at the same time recognizing the missional significance of the inter-relationship of congregations in a locale. It starts from the understanding that God has invited the Church to join him in his mission. As God's sent people, each congregation is to understand itself as a sign, instrument, and foretaste of the gospel.³² The pursuit of unity through Church reconciliation is an important way these missional commitments get lived out.

This is further grounded in the Free Church belief that each congregation is a gathered group of people where the ecclesially formulating presence of the Spirit constitutes them as the church.³³ Volf captures this idea when he writes, "The church nowhere exists above the locally assembled congregation but rather in, with and beneath it."³⁴ Out of the TrueCity experience the conviction has developed that how congregations relate to each other, the *with* dimension, is vitally important to their mission. Koivisto opens a pathway for understanding this in his contention that there are three distinct ways the term *church* is used in the New Testament. There are the

³¹ "What we need to find is a way of speaking of the actual Church, which holds that earthly-heavenly tension in faithful continuity with the longer tradition and in ways authentic to the epistemological assumptions of our own time." Watkins, *Disclosing Church*, 7.

³² Newbigin, "Local Church," 119.

³³ Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 129.

³⁴ Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 138.

communities which gather regularly in people's homes, the collective whole of believers in a geographic locale (usually a city), and the entire group of believers throughout the world.³⁵ He sees these as different dimensions of church and holds that all of them are important. He equates the experience of congregational life to the house church dimension and argues that what is most often missing is the city Church dimension.³⁶ This matches up with the experience of the greater vitality which flowed from the more tangible unity the TrueCity network catalyzed. This TrueCity experience generated the belief that this *with* dimension of the city Church is vitally important to the health and witness of the various congregations which are a part of it, and it is the dimension within which Church reconciliation is most needed.

A practice-based ecclesiology must take this *with* dimension into account as central to God's active pursuit of Church unity and the ways God leads his Church to participate in this. A strong case can be made for God's deep concern and active involvement in pursuing the unity of the Church both from scripture and from theological reflection on the nature of God. This unity is a current but not yet fully realized reality, has a differentiated nature, and is pursued by a Church reconciliation process to which the Church is called by God to participate.

The Priority of Unity

The contention that God is deeply concerned and actively involved in pursuing unity is anchored in Jesus' prayer in John 17. "I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one—I in them and you in me—so that they may be

³⁵ Koivisto, *One Lord, One Faith*, 25.

³⁶ Koivisto, *One Lord, One Faith*, 48.

brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me (John 17:22–23 NIV).” In so praying, Jesus connects Church unity to the reality of who God is. Unity simultaneously glorifies God and witnesses to the world of the veracity of the gospel.

The importance of Church unity is further amplified by the number of times it is addressed throughout the New Testament. Repeatedly in 1 Corinthians Paul pleads with the believers to be unified starting in 1:10 where he appeals that “there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly united in mind and thought.” In chapter 3 he equates division with immaturity and warns them of dire consequences for anyone who destroys their unity. And then in chapters 12–14 he provides them with a paradigm for understanding how their individual giftedness is intended to strengthen their unity. Paul’s exploration of love in chapter 13 is written for the purpose of impressing on them a way of life that prioritizes Church unity. This is the case in Philippians 2 as well, where one of Paul’s clearest Christological explorations is shared as an exhortation to be “one of spirit and of one mind (Phil 2:2).” In numerous other passages such as Romans 14–15, Ephesians 2 and 4, Colossians 3, James 4, and 1 Peter 2 the authors exhort to and equip for the pursuit unity.

This must be held in tension with the strong scriptural reasons for asking hard questions about gospel faithfulness and separating when it is being compromised. A survey of the New Testament finds that the admonition to “guard the gospel” (1 Tim 1:14) is a strong, pervasive theme. In Acts 20:30–31 Luke shares Paul’s exhortation to the Ephesian elders, “Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. So be on your guard!” In Galatians 1:6–7 we

read, “I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you to live in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ.” There are many more passages that have a similar theme such as in 2 Corinthians 11, Galatians 4 and 6, Philippians 3, 1 Timothy 1 and 6, 2 Timothy 3, 2 Peter 2, 1 John 2 and 4, 2 John, and Jude.

There are a cluster of issues that these passages are addressing, such as the right understanding of the person of Christ; what is and is not consistent with the gospel; and those seeking personal gain and pursuing an immoral lifestyle. It is instructive to note that among these, one of the most prevalent criteria for separating from another believer is when they are causing division. This is an emphasis in both the Acts and Galatians passages just referenced. The warning in Titus 3:10 lays this out most clearly. Those who work against unity are signalled out for discipline as we are told, “Warn a divisive person once, and then warn them a second time. After that, have nothing to do with them.” Far from arguing against the importance of unity, this and other warning passages demonstrate unity is a non-negotiable that is to be guarded. One of the most important ways of guarding the gospel is to pursue Church reconciliation.

I find that as an evangelical we too often privilege the warnings and only pursue unity when it is clear that others believe all the same things we do. This is the shadow side of evangelicalism. Unity is made contingent on agreement to one or another extra-biblically formulated doctrinal statements, rather than recognizing that unity should be included in those formulations. When a formulation of truth is centered and used to justify separation from others who differ, it shows that such doctrinal formulations are

mistakenly understood to contain the fullness of truth. Critical realism can be helpful at this point in providing tools for critiquing the tendency to positivistic perspectives that over-estimate the ability to objectively set out truth. There is an all too prevalent tendency to conflate the existence of ontological reality with the epistemological ability to access it.³⁷

This can be seen in how there have been ever evolving criteria put forward for discerning what are in fact core doctrines. While it is right and healthy to put forward new ways to frame historic truth, it should be acknowledged that this work occurs from within the limited perspective of specific traditions.³⁸ Discerning when and how best to separate remains a challenging discernment question which will require contextual wisdom and spiritual sensitivity in each situation where significant theological and ethical differences are encountered, but even then it is important to consider the contentions of those like Peter Leithart that division cannot be accepted as a given without compromising the witness of the gospel.³⁹

The Process of Unity

Unity in Christ is a gift the Church has already received but one which will not be fully realized until the new creation comes. In this age, scripture makes clear that God is at work deepening and broadening unity. Participating in Church reconciliation is the way the Church joins God in pursuing it. This is brought out in John 17:23, for while it is clearly Jesus' intention for the Church to be one as he and the Father are one, he

³⁷ Wright, *Christianity and Critical Realism*, 4.

³⁸ See for example Ortlund, *Finding the Right Hills*, 76–80; and Redeemer City to City, “Theological Core and Ethical Statement,” 1–2.

³⁹ Leithart, *The End of Protestantism*, loc 96.

anticipates this being a process when he prays for believers to be “brought to complete unity.” The contention is that unity already exists because of what Christ accomplished and the Spirit’s on-going presence in the life of the Church. As Bosch contends: “We have to confess that the loss of ecclesial unity is not just a vexation but a sin. It is in Christ, already a fact, a given.”⁴⁰ This on a collective level is parallel to the reality of salvation in Christ on an individual level. It is a finished work, and yet it is still in process and will not be completed until the new creation. The Church in this age lives in the midst of the process of unity being realized, somewhere between the inauguration and consummation of this reality.

This same emphasis comes out even more clearly in Ephesians 4 where in verse 3 Paul exhorts to “make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.” The assumption is that this kind of unity already exists. It is not created by human initiative; the Spirit has already done that. The Church is called to cultivate it. Verse 13 highlights how the purpose of the fivefold gifts is to build up the body until “unity of the faith (Eph 4:13)” is reached.⁴¹ It is a point somewhere on the horizon when believers are no longer infants. It is the time when together the Church reaches maturity. A maturity that is measured by the quality of unity. The tension between these two realities is the Church’s current experience. All believers are already one in Christ. Despite all appearances and popular perception, there is a common shared life in the Spirit. But the Spirit is not content with this current situation. The Spirit gives gifts to all believers so that they learn to work together and, in the process, become a “whole

⁴⁰ Bosch, *Transforming*, 465.

⁴¹ The fivefold gifts refer to the five roles listed in Eph 4:11 which are apostle, prophet, evangelist, teacher and pastor.

body,” “joined and held together by every supporting ligament, growing and building itself up in love as each part does its work (Eph 4:16).”

The Differentiated Nature of Unity

The Church unity God is pursuing among us has a differentiated nature. Unity is not the same as uniformity. There is a fundamental relationship between unity and plurality. This is closely tied to the mark of catholicity to which the ancient creeds attest. This word points to the diverse totality of the interconnected reality of the global expression of the Church and the fullness God intends for this totality to become as part of the new creation. The Church is a heterogeneous whole, which means it is called to pursue a differentiated unity.⁴²

Craig Van Gelder highlights two related aspects of catholicity. First, the Church through the Spirit is translatable into every particular cultural context so that each culture will have a manifestation of the Church that incarnates the gospel in that time and place. Second, living in tension with that reality, the Church in each time and place will share a gospel-shaped commonality with all other manifestations of the Church.⁴³ Differentiated unity is the way in which every particular community points towards the full expression of the global Church throughout time.⁴⁴

James Dunn’s *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament* is instructive on this point. He goes to great lengths to show how much diversity of perspective there is between the different New Testament authors. While they share a high Christology, on

⁴² Volf, *Likeness*, 262.

⁴³ Van Gelder, *Essence*, 119.

⁴⁴ Guder, *Missional Church*, 257.

every other important issue, from the content of the kerygma to patterns of worship to the use of the Old Testament, there is a range of views.⁴⁵ One key conclusion is that every Christian community functions with a canon within the canon.⁴⁶ He contends that this is not a scandal but is simply consistent with the origins of the faith. Whenever theological convictions beyond the core of Jesus-the-man-now-exalted are framed, there is an irreducible diversity in how various doctrines are prioritized and how different practices are lived out.⁴⁷ So, a theology of unity which reflects the full witness of scripture must recognize diversity as a strength that is enriching the Church more than a problem to be solved.

The Call to Church Reconciliation

Church unity is not so much an ideal to be aspired to as a reality to learn to live out ever more fully. This is why participation in the process of Church reconciliation is crucial. Missional theology emphasizes this point. Because unity is inherent to God's trinitarian reality, pursuing it is characteristic of the *missio Dei*.⁴⁸ Grounded in the divine act of sending (the meaning of the Latin word *missio*), the *missio Dei* gives direction to how the Church engages the world.⁴⁹ Every aspect of the Church's life is connected to and colored by the reality of the call to participate in God's mission. Recognizing that reconciliation is one of the predominant ways in which God's mission is described in

⁴⁵ Dunn, *Unity and Diversity*, xxx.

⁴⁶ Dunn, *Unity and Diversity*, 409.

⁴⁷ Dunn, *Unity and Diversity*, 410.

⁴⁸ Guder, "Multicultural and Translational," 33.

⁴⁹ Jørgensen, "Foundations," 103.

scripture, leads to framing Church reconciliation as an important aspect of the mission believers are called to join God in.

There is both a vertical and horizontal dimension to how God's mission of reconciliation is described in the New Testament. The main way the verb *to reconcile* and the noun form of *reconciliation* get used is in describing the vertical dimension by which God's work in Christ of making a way for sinful humanity and the whole of alienated creation to come into restored relationship with God is accomplished through the cross (Rom 5:10–11, 2 Co 5:19, and Col 1:20). Yet while the primary emphasis is on this vertical dimension, Eph 2:14–16 makes clear that there is also an integrated social process which is often framed as the horizontal dimension of reconciliation.⁵⁰

This horizontal dimension is also God's initiative. It is the active reconciling force that the Spirit brings to bear on the Church. Christ is the embodiment of this peace.⁵¹ The word *peace* is used four times in Ephesians 2:11–22. It is not just the absence of conflict but the flourishing of life that God intends for believers individually and collectively.⁵² Christ broke down the dividing wall of hostility between Jews and Gentiles through the cross by putting to death the enmity that kept humanity at odds with God and each other. "The enmity which calls for reconciliation is defined in terms of two human groups, Jews and Gentiles. In that the Law excluded Gentiles, it was the source of their enmity. The animosity is said to be *killed* by Christ's work on the cross, and the resulting peace constitutes the new condition of Christian existence."⁵³ The word *reconcile* here in v.16 is the same word used in Col 1:20 of Christ's cosmic work

⁵⁰ Augustine, *Reconciliation*, 20–21.

⁵¹ Bruce, *The Epistles*, 295.

⁵² Bruce, *The Epistles*, 295, italic in the original.

⁵³ Porter, "Peace, Reconciliation," 698–99.

“to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven.”⁵⁴ These passages are the earliest known uses of this word. Paul seems to have created it to more forcefully express the powerful work God is doing to restore and enhance the relationships between believers in line with the reality of the gospel.⁵⁵ This points to the reality that Christ’s work in killing enmity and reconciling believers in the Church is part of his universal work of reconciling all things. Eph 2:18 makes clear that both Jews and Gentiles have access in one Spirit to the Father through what Christ did. It is this shared access in the Spirit that believers are exhorted to maintain in Eph 4:3. So in the call to maintain the unity of the Spirit the Church has an invitation to participate with Christ in what he is doing in reconciling all things, and conversely when enmity is allowed to take root amidst relationships in the Church it is a capitulation to sin. This argues for the need to develop a theology of Church reconciliation.

This is first and foremost God’s mission that he has accomplished through Christ. But the Church is also called to participate in this mission of reconciliation.⁵⁶ This gets laid out most clearly in 2 Corinthians 5 where Paul proclaims how God has entrusted to the Church the ministry of reconciliation. Evangelicals tend to differentiate too rigidly between vertical reconciliation with God and horizontal reconciliation with others and to read this passage only in terms of the vertical. But as Ephesians 2 makes clear, Christ’s purpose is to create one new humanity by breaking down the dividing walls which have kept people separated. Believers are reconciled to God in and through

⁵⁴ Porter, “Peace, Reconciliation,” 690.

⁵⁵ Porter, “Peace, Reconciliation,” 690. “The verb for reconciliation, *apokatalassō*, here in its earliest attested usage in Greek literature, is an emphatically prefixed form of the verb (*katalassō*) used in 2 Corinthians 5:18–21 and Romans 5:8–11.”

⁵⁶ Braaten, *One Body*, loc 163.

the process of becoming one body. The two dimensions happen in tandem. This is further reinforced in passages such as 1 Corinthians 12:13, Galatians 3:28, and Colossians 3:11 where Paul takes aim at social, ethnic, and gender distinctions and proclaims them irrelevant to the Church's oneness in Christ.⁵⁷ The reconciliation the Church is called to, and the unity that it contributes to is part of participation in God's mission.

But while believers have the privilege to be agents of that mission, they also are the locus of that mission. Van Gelder highlights this reality when he writes:

The starting point for thinking about the church is to recognize that it is already a community that possesses an essential oneness. In working from this starting point, it is as if God says to the diversity of churches in any context, 'You are one. Now learn how to affirm each other's distinctiveness while you work out your differences.'⁵⁸

Church reconciliation is the process by which the Church affirms distinctives and works out differences. If congregations are in open conflict with each other or if they have simply come to function as if others do not exist, the fullness of unity which will glorify God and witness to the world is not yet being realized as God desires. To whatever extent the relationship between congregations does not embody the unity God intends for them to experience, to that extent Church reconciliation is needed. Believers are called to give the Spirit space to break down the dividing walls which exist between them within the Church to glorify God and as a witness of God's reality to the world around them. This is Church reconciliation, and why it is so important to God.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Braaten, *One Body*, loc 140.

⁵⁸ Van Gelder, *Essence*, 122.

⁵⁹ Swanson and Williams, *To Transform*, 103–107.

The Theoretical Paradigm of Trust

A significant challenge for pursuing Church reconciliation is knowing what signifies its reality. In our experience of developing a missional church network in Hamilton, the trust which developed between congregations made the growth of unity tangibly evident. This experience led to the conclusion that trust provides an important, tangible experience of the enriched unity produced by the process of Church reconciliation. The contention is that if the process which leads to such trust developing comes to be better understood, then how to pursue Church reconciliation will come more clearly into focus.

Trust is the rich, pervasive phenomenon of how one's expectations create a willingness (or lack of) to make oneself vulnerable to other individuals, groups, and institutions. It is an essential element in all healthy relationships. A vast array of social and applied science disciplines have explored trust, making it a theoretically robust, extensively researched phenomenon, though strangely it has only rarely and incidentally been explored within Practical Theology.⁶⁰ In the research for this project the experience and observation of trust were used to identify fruitful practices which facilitate Church reconciliation. Since trust is an essential component of social relations, it acts as a marker by which one can assess how various pastoral and congregational practices impact the relationship between congregations.⁶¹ Recognizing which practices strengthen trust between congregations, provides insight into fruitful ways to pursue

⁶⁰ A search of the journals *Practical Theology*, *The International Journal of Practical Theology*, *Theology Today*, and *The Journal of Pastoral Care and Counselling* turned up no articles which directly addressed trust.

⁶¹ Sztompka, *Trust*, ix.

Church reconciliation, enriching unity so congregational vitality grows, and the Church's witness is enhanced.

The grounded theory research methodology as it was originally practiced by Glaser and Strauss discouraged any sort of prior literature review to pursue a purely inductive approach to the research.⁶² Subsequent practitioners have recognized the importance of having an adequate grasp of the research topic to effectively engage it.⁶³ Critical realist grounded theory advocates an abductive approach which recognizes that one always starts with presuppositions which need to be acknowledged and have their reliability tested. In so doing one can be open to research results which do not fit with the initial thinking leading to new insights. Three important considerations about trust which came from the initial engagement with the literature shaped the way the research for this project developed. They are the definition of trust, the multi-level nature of trust, and the antecedents of trust.

The first aspect of trust theory which informed this research was the work that has been done to define trust. Trust is pervasively referenced in our cultural context and what is meant by the word is intuitively if vaguely understood. Attempts to describe specifically what is meant are much more difficult to navigate. The definition of trust has been a significant topic of debate for a number of decades, but though there continues to be on-going discussion, the literature has moved towards greater consensus.⁶⁴ For the purposes of this research the definition of trust used was, "the willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party based upon

⁶² Charmaz, *Constructing*, 306.

⁶³ Charmaz, *Constructing*, 306.

⁶⁴ PhytlikZillig and Kimbrough, "Consensus," 18.

positive expectations of the intentions or behavior of another.”⁶⁵ While the simplicity of this definition helped create alignment of understanding in the interviews done for this project, it is important not to lose track of how complex the concept of trust actually is. This definition focuses on the person who is trusting (trustor) and their willingness to risk vulnerability. It does not necessitate action or address issues of agency. In surveying the issues which have made establishing one accepted definition of trust challenging, PytlikZillig and Kimbrough point out the limitations of this definition and raise awareness of other aspects of trust which need to be considered. The issues they highlight include which actors need to be referenced and how their relationship is conceptualized; what the context of trust is and how goals, vulnerability, and risk figure in; and what the degree and type of agency involved in the experience is.⁶⁶ They recognize the important role a seminal definition plays in research, but advocate for ongoing work to better understand the nuanced process which trust in fact is.⁶⁷

A second aspect of trust theory which figures prominently in the research for this project is the way trust functions at a range of levels from an individual level as a psychological state to various collective levels which function as social phenomena. The multi-level nature of trust was described to those being interviewed to get them thinking beyond the normally assumed individual level, toward the way in which congregations trust (or don’t trust) each other. The inter-related but distinct nature of the levels of trust allows for recognition of how the trust of individuals differs from but is still a part of the collective reality of inter-congregational trust.⁶⁸ There is greater familiarity with the

⁶⁵ Gillespie et al., “Organizational Trust,” 4.

⁶⁶ PytlikZillig and Kimbrough, “Consensus,” 20–23.

⁶⁷ PytlikZillig and Kimbrough, “Consensus,” 42.

⁶⁸ Fulmer, “Multilevel Trust,” 143.

inter-personal level which is at work in the relationship of two congregants or between the pastors of two different congregations. This is the level naturally assumed when there is a conversation about trust. The collective levels of trust are a common if less reflected upon part of life. Individuals trust collectives such as when a congregant trusts an elders' board. Collectives trust individuals such as the way a congregation trusts their pastor. And collectives trust each other such as the way organizations in a healthy partnership relate to each other. So, while individual trust is an important aspect of Church unity, developing collective levels of trust such as at this inter-congregational level plays a crucial role in the process of Church reconciliation which has not been adequately recognized or engaged.

One of the important attributes of the TrueCity network is how congregations developed relationships with each other and how that became embedded in the way the network functioned by having congregations formally enter into partnership with each other. The definition of trust used for this project is multi-level in nature as both the trustor and the one being trusted (trustee) can be individuals or collectives.⁶⁹ It thus allows the exploration of how individuals relate, how individuals relate to congregations, and how congregations relate to each other. The definition has also been researched on multiple levels and the interaction between these differing levels, so that there is extensive input in the literature around the process of how trust is formed.⁷⁰ This project engaged in multi-level research in that it explored both the development of trust at an individual level between church leaders from different congregations and how trust functions at the collective level between congregations. It digs into the interplay

⁶⁹ Gillespie et al., "Organizational Trust," 4.

⁷⁰ Baer and Colquitt, "Why Do People Trust?" 163.

between how individual trust influences inter-congregational trust and how simultaneously congregational patterns of trust impact individual trust development.

The literature on inter-organizational trust recognizes that there is a process of development which begins with individuals from the organizations involved who establish an individual relationship in order to explore the possibilities of their organizations having a relationship.⁷¹ These individuals are known as *boundary spanners*, and they are described as being the ones who are “primarily in charge of the relevant interorganizational relationships and tend to be more closely involved in these relationships than other members of the organization.”⁷² The research indicates that the inter-personal trust between boundary spanners is of particular importance in how trust forms between their organizations.⁷³

This project worked from the assumption that pastors are the primary boundary spanners between congregations, and the research has confirmed this assumption. While this is rarely formally recognized, pastors are the ones expected to know about other congregations and to establish relationships if and when these will be beneficial to their congregation. Pastors are the individuals within the congregational system that are most representative of the congregation and so are in the best position to bring congregations into relationship with each other. Other congregational leaders can and do play boundary spanning roles when they function as formally recognized leaders representing their congregation. This project explored inter-congregational trust through the perception of pastors and other leaders who function as boundary spanners. The

⁷¹ I could find no examples of studies which explored inter-congregational trust. The closest corollary are studies of inter-organizational trust.

⁷² Schilke and Cook, “Trust Development,” 283.

⁷³ Schilke and Cook, “Trust Development,” 283.

research found that boundary spanners play a central role in the process by which inter-congregational trust forms and is deepened.

A final aspect of trust theory which informed this research is the role that the antecedents of trust, especially trustworthiness, plays in creating trust. Research on the antecedents of trust explores which traits of the trustor and trustee are important for trust to form. There are three primary bases which research on the antecedents look to explore, the disposition to trust, affect-based trust, and trustworthiness.⁷⁴

The disposition to trust is a trustor's propensity to respond to others as reliable. The research suggests this antecedent forms early in life and does not change significantly over time. It comes into play most often in novel situations before trustworthiness can be assessed.⁷⁵

Affect-based trust grows out of the emotional bond a trustor feels towards the trustee. People more readily trust those they like and those who are like them. The research indicates that affect-based trust is not easily changed.⁷⁶

The other widely recognized antecedent of trust is trustworthiness. A trustor assesses how trustworthy a trustee is. This happens over time, and unlike the other antecedents, assessments of trustworthiness are more changeable. There have been a number of proposed schemas for which attributes make up trustworthiness. The most accepted of these, proposed by Mayer et al., breaks trustworthiness down into the three dimensions of competence, integrity, and benevolence.⁷⁷ Competence is the skills and

⁷⁴ Schoorman, et al., "Organizational Trust," 349.

⁷⁵ Baer and Colquitt, "Why Do People Trust?," 166.

⁷⁶ Baer and Colquitt, "Why Do People Trust?," 173.

⁷⁷ Baer and Colquitt, "Why Do People Trust?," 163.

ability a party has which enable influence in an area of expertise.⁷⁸ This recognizes that the competence which brings influence is limited to a specific area but does not necessarily ensure competence in other areas. For example, at an individual level, a congregation member may be highly skilled as an accountant and be a huge asset in financial management but may not be a good public communicator and so might struggle if asked to present the budget at a congregational meeting. She therefore might be highly trusted to create and manage the budget, but not trusted to communicate it. This also can function at a collective level where one congregation might be recognized as trustworthy for recruiting volunteers for service projects, but not as trustworthy at arts ventures.

Integrity is the trustors perception that the trustee holds to and consistently lives out an acceptable set of values.⁷⁹ There must be alignment between the trustor and trustee on the values they hold to, and the trustee has to be perceived to live consistently with the values they espouse. Both aspects need to align for a trustee to be perceived as having integrity. Perceptions of integrity are particularly important in the formation of trust.⁸⁰

Benevolence is the extent the trustor perceives that the trustee is concerned with their well-being where it is not about the trustee's self-interest. There is an understanding of a specific, positive relational connection. A trustor's belief in the benevolence of a trustee leads to a willingness to make themselves more vulnerable because the perceived risk is less.⁸¹ While these antecedents have been researched most

⁷⁸ Mayer, et al., "An Integrative Model," 717.

⁷⁹ Mayer, et al., "An Integrative Model," 719.

⁸⁰ Baer and Colquitt, "Why Do People Trust?," 170.

⁸¹ Mayer, et al., "An Integrative Model," 718.

thoroughly at the individual level, they are understood to be at play at the various collective levels as well.

Dissertation Project Overview

This dissertation project has four additional chapters. Chapter 2 is a literature review which has two primary sections. First, it will survey missional, Free Church evangelical explorations of unity and catholicity and how these relate to Church reconciliation, and second, it will provide an overview of the relevant literature on trust theory and research including how the concept of boundary spanning relates to trust theory.

Chapter 3 provides an overview of the methodology and then lays out the research findings. It starts with a discussion of how this project uses a critical realist grounded theory methodology. It describes the data gathering, the data analysis cycle which was employed, the theoretical categories which emerged, and how theoretical sampling was used to saturate them. It then presents an overview of the data and describes the categories which emerged from it. It presents the five-phase boundary spanning process theory of inter-congregational trust building which came into focus through the process. For each phase of the process, trust embedding social practices which fruitfully develop trust are identified.

In chapter 4 the boundary spanning process theory of inter-congregational trust building which emerged from the research is situated in a theology of Church reconciliation. An inclusivist Free Church ecclesiological framing of congregations is developed and it is argued that the relationships between these congregations play a central role in creating a climate of unity in the ecclesial ecology of a city Church

setting. It is argued that by more fully living into the ecclesial mark of catholicity with its emphasis on differentiated unity, congregations can better participate in grasping the wholeness and fullness of the gospel so that Church unity is broadened and deepened. It concludes with an exploration of how theological trust develops which is one crucial way in which catholicity can be enriched.

In conclusion, in chapter 5, the findings and main contention of this project are summarized and four groups for whom this project has significance are indicated. The limitations of the research are laid out and areas for future research are identified.

Conclusion

This study is a practice-led research project that contributes to practical theology by exploring the question of how inter-congregational trust develops and the significance it has for how Church unity forms in a city context. In what follows Church reconciliation is laid out as the process by which believers participate with the Spirit in deepening the differentiated unity which God intends to characterize the Church. By operationalizing Church reconciliation in terms of trust development, pastoral and congregational practices which have the potential to make unity more robust in a local context have been identified. When trust develops across congregational differences it makes enriched unity more tangible. The research pointed to the significance of the context of a missional church network in cultivating this inter-congregational trust. Diversity makes unity more vibrant, and congregations are more apt to connect across differences in a multi-congregational network.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter reviews the literature which is pertinent to the contention that congregational participation in the process of Church reconciliation is of central importance and that the development of inter-congregational trust is a key dimension of how it gets lived out. The introduction made the case for the priority of Church unity, how it involves a process which is only complete in the new creation, is differentiated in nature, and is a part of God's reconciling mission. The first section of this literature review will explore these themes in the missional and Free Church evangelical ecclesiological literature. First, the place Church unity holds in missional ecclesiology is considered in conversation with Newbigin, Bosch, Guder, and Van Gelder. Next, how Free Church evangelicals frame the importance of unity is explored in conversation with Grenz, Harper and Metzger, Leithart, Volf, Koivisto, and Long. The importance of catholicity and the reconciliation mandate it gives will emerge from this survey. The focus of this exploration is on the importance of Church unity in missional and Free Church evangelical ecclesiologies because the TrueCity network emerged out of and continues to inhabit these streams and because it is within these streams that I have had my experience of pursuing Church reconciliation. There is a strong affirmation across this literature of the importance of Church unity, the necessity of pursuing it, and the challenges which make it difficult to achieve. While various authors point to the

importance of local expressions of unity, what is missing is practical input on how best to pursue and assess the state of such local unity initiatives. Input from Shreiter, Swamy, and McClure Haraway is reviewed as a bridge from this section to the next because their input shifts the focus from more theoretical considerations to the practical question of how this process of Church reconciliation is engaged and what flows from it.

In the research for this project the focus is specifically on how trust provides the needed practical input. The second section of this review is an exploration of the trust literature which is pertinent to congregational life and the possibility of better developing the inter-congregational trust which is one key attribute of God's intended differentiated unity. Significant work has been done to theorize and research the nature of inter-organizational trust, and since the characteristics of inter-congregational trust have not been explored, inter-organizational trust provides the best insights and direction as to how inter-congregational trust forms and functions. There is a spectrum of forms of trust which runs from micro, psychologically based forms of inter-personal trust on one end to the sociologically based, more general social trust on the other. Inter-organizational trust sits somewhere in the middle of this spectrum, impacted by both ends, but with its own unique characteristics. While inter-congregational trust is not identical to inter-organizational trust, it functions similarly in important ways which make the theories and research of this phenomenon pertinent. Inter-personal, organizational, and network forms of trust are also explored as they are closely related to and inform this project.

Missional Church Ecclesiological Input

The British theologian and missiologist Lesslie Newbigin wrote extensively on the importance of Church unity and its relationship to missions. This literature review highlights three themes in dialogue with four of Newbigin's works and a dissertation written by Scot Sherman which explores at length what he describes as Newbigin's "Reunion Ecclesiology."¹ The three themes are the relationship of mission and unity, the eschatological nature of the Church, and the importance of diversity for robust unity.

Newbigin makes a point of how it was missionaries in various global contexts who were the prime movers in the pursuit of Christian unity because they found that the disunity of the Church was a major hinderance to their witness.² He relates how he found himself regularly questioned as to why if Christ is the one savior for all of humanity, the Church is so divided.³ This leads to Newbigin reflecting often on how important unity is to the witness which is central to mission. For Newbigin the Church is the means by which God intends to bring all humanity together as one family, healing the brokenness and oppression which ails humanity.⁴

The Church in its current state is not yet what it will be. It is this eschatological framing which provides the starting place for what Newbigin sees as the way forward. In his book, *The Household of God* he lays this out most fully. He gives three answers to the question "What is the manner of our ingrafting into Christ?" For Protestants, "we are incorporated in Christ by hearing and believing the Gospel." For Catholics, "we are incorporated by sacramental participation in the life of the historically continuous

¹ Sherman, *Visible Church Reunion*, 2.

² Newbigin, *Household*, 18.

³ Newbigin, *Is Christ Divided?*, 21–22.

⁴ Newbigin, *Is Christ Divided?*, 7.

Church.” And for Pentecostals, “we are incorporated by receiving and abiding in the Holy Spirit.”⁵ He explores each of these at length establishing his claim that all three are true and that something significant is lost if we exclude any of them. He concludes that the heart of the problem of disunity is the expectation that any one tradition can conclusively define the Church in this age and then determine which groups fit and which ones do not. Instead, recognition is needed that the existence of the Church in this age is contingent on God’s mercy and that it is only in the age to come that the Church will come to be what God intends her to be.⁶ In this he is arguing that we as the Church are in process. We have the first fruits of unity but not the totality of it.

Newbigin develops a cogent framing of the eschatological nature of the Church by describing it as a sign, instrument, and foretaste of the reign of God for the place it is situated. The Church is a sign when it points towards the future promise of what God is bringing about. The Church is an instrument when it makes itself available to pursue God’s will for that place. And the Church is a foretaste whenever it tangibly lives out the peace and joy of God’s reign here in the midst of this age.⁷

In “What is ‘a local church truly united’?” he uses this framing to dig into the nature of what local unity should look like. He is advocating for a framing of Church unity that takes each local context seriously, recognizing that each place will have its own unique circumstances which the various congregations will have to navigate to be truly united as the local Church for that place. Newbigin contends that having different congregational expressions is valid for the sake of mission.⁸ He notes that there will be

⁵ Newbigin, *Household*, 30.

⁶ Newbigin, *Household*, 132–133.

⁷ Newbigin, “Local Church,” 119.

⁸ Newbigin, “Local Church,” 123.

differences of language and culture within the context of most places and that therefore separate congregations will be needed to effectively proclaim the gospel across these differences. In this he recognizes the necessity of diversity which is captured in the Church's historic commitment to catholicity.⁹ Catholicity holds in tension the universality of the gospel and the particularity of how it gets lived out in each context. So there needs to be a plurality of congregational expressions, but there should be full mutual recognition, total freedom of movement between congregations, and a structure which is committed to pursuing unity.¹⁰

Newbigin's writings invaluablely lay out why unity is essential and point towards appreciative ways of listening well to each other and embracing what different Church traditions contribute. What is lacking is specific input on how congregations in a local context come to have the quality of relationship necessary for unity to flourish. His input on how unity is developed is weighted toward macro-level structural innovations such as union and conciliarity. What is missing is input on how to pursue building relationships between congregations, especially congregations coming from different denominations.

The South African missiologist David Bosch in his book *Transforming Mission*, surveys the mission paradigm of six historic epochs starting with the founding of the Church and concluding with what he calls "the emerging ecumenical paradigm."¹¹ He explores this final epoch at greater length recognizing that it is still emerging. One key section of this exploration digs into "Mission as Common Witness" in which he surveys

⁹ Newbigin, "Local Church," 120.

¹⁰ Newbigin, "Local Church," 124.

¹¹ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 181–182.

the pursuit of Church unity through ecumenism focusing on the development of the World Council of Churches (WCC) and the deliberations of the Roman Catholic Church which centered around the Vatican II documents. His sense of the significance of these developments and his own commitment to engaging them comes out in his statement, “Ecumenism is not a passive and semi-reluctant coming together but an active and deliberate living and working together.”¹² He concludes the section by outlining key contours of the ecumenical paradigm, two of which are of particular relevance to this project.

First because unity is God’s gift, a false dichotomy is created whenever one or another doctrinal position is pitted against unity. All doctrine rightly framed will value and move us toward true unity. He writes, “A hallmark of Paul’s theology was his refusal to entertain the possibility of a disjunction between the truth of the gospel and the divinely willed unity of the church; for him the supreme value was indissolubly this unity and this truth.”¹³ He calls our attention to the reality that unity is not only a gift but also a command.¹⁴

Second, holding onto both truth and unity means there will be tension which we have to learn to navigate. We cannot expect uniformity but need to learn to live with differences. “Our goal is not a fellowship exempt from conflict, but one which is characterized by unity in reconciled diversity. . . . In the midst of diversity, however, there is a center: Jesus Christ.”¹⁵ Bosch modeled this contention well. As an evangelical

¹² Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 464.

¹³ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 464.

¹⁴ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 467.

¹⁵ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 465.

who functioned as a key participant in WCC consultations he regularly experienced this kind of tension.¹⁶

He helpfully recognizes that what gets written up in WCC and Catholic Church documents is too often not practiced at “a local level where it really matters.”¹⁷ This assessment alongside of his modeling of engagement are important contributions. He relates broadly, critiques strongly but generously with the intent to see mutual growth happen. These are important trust building practices. Even so, he does not give any substantive input on how such postures and practices can fruitfully be lived out in local settings.

The Gospel and Our Culture Network (GOCN) is a group of scholars writing in response to and dialogue with the work of Lesslie Newbigin. Their collaboratively written 1998 volume *The Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* introduced the term *missional* as a way of capturing the reality that because God calls the whole Church to participate in his mission, a shift in how the Church understands itself and engages the culture is needed. They recognize and explore how Church unity is part of the way in which the Church is called to live out God’s mission.

In the final chapter “Missional Connectedness – The Community of Communities in Mission” they begin by stating: “It is not biblical, however, for particular communities of the visible, organized church to exist in isolation from one another.”¹⁸ The authors go on to work from the marks of the Church to name what the

¹⁶ Bosch, “Your Will Be Done?,” 137–138.

¹⁷ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 463.

¹⁸ Guder, *Missional*, 248.

agenda for connecting should be. They write: “The church that is faithful to the gospel tradition, the Nicene Creed proclaimed, will always be experienced as ‘one, holy, catholic, and apostolic.’”¹⁹ They suggest that, for our context, it is necessary to reframe these words by changing them into adverbs and reversing their order so that they become proclaiming, reconciling, sanctifying, and unifying.²⁰ This helpfully connects catholicity to reconciliation which has proven an important insight for this project. They contend, “The connectional structures of the Church are needed to represent the missional unity that transcends all human boundaries and cultural distinctives.”²¹ Intriguingly even with this call for connective structures they do not encourage congregations in a given location to cooperatively relate to one another, and they offer no input on how to assess when various Church structures are appropriately pursuing God’s missional call to unifying outcomes.

Exploring this same theme seventeen years later, one of these authors, Darrell Guder observes that even for denominations that are committed to worldwide ecumenical work, there has been little vision and even less tangible progress on local Church reconciliation.²² He recognizes that a major restraint in this regard is the lack of organizational imagination. Congregations generally continue to stay isolated within the Christendom-shaped polities that characterize their traditions, leaving little room for local catholicity.²³ His conjecture is that the language of ‘networks’ most readily corresponds to the organizational shape of the early Church, and wonders if this holds

¹⁹ Guder, *Missional*, 254.

²⁰ Guder, *Missional*, 255.

²¹ Guder, *Missional*, 265.

²² Guder, *Called to Witness*, 196.

²³ Guder, *Called to Witness*, 86.

potential for a richer expression of local unity.²⁴ While this encouragingly connects with what we have experienced through developing TrueCity, Guder offers nothing further on how to pursue missional collaboration consistent with a commitment to local Church reconciliation.

In his book *The Essence of the Church*, Craig Van Gelder provides a primer on missional ecclesiology introducing how the *missio Dei* perspective that the whole Church is called to join with God in his mission reframes every aspect of how to live out the reality of being the Church. Like the GOCN (of which he is a contributor), he emphasizes the relevance of the four marks of the church.²⁵ Van Gelder does this by picking a contrasting term for each of the marks which gives more depth to how they are understood. Most pertinent for this project is first, how he pairs the term *catholic* with *local* and shows how the intention behind the term is to capture both the universal translatability and contextual particularity of the Church.²⁶ And second, how he pairs the term *one* with *many* to bring out the way unity and diversity go together.²⁷ This highlights the crucial way in which the catholic nature of the Church modifies our understanding of the mark of unity. He helpfully advocates for a commitment to real communion between diverse expressions of the Church in every local setting.²⁸ He does not specifically explore how local congregations from different traditions can relate nor address the importance of developing inter-congregational trust. Even so, by distinguishing between confession and governance and advocating for creative

²⁴ Guder, *Called to Witness*, 86.

²⁵ Van Gelder, *The Essence of the Church*, 113–116.

²⁶ Van Gelder, *The Essence of the Church*, 118–120.

²⁷ Van Gelder, *The Essence of the Church*, 121.

²⁸ Van Gelder, *The Essence of the Church*, 122.

structures that communicate a congregation's values within a cultural context, he resources the Church for developing structures which strengthen local unity.

Missional ecclesiological writers consistently attest to the importance of local Church unity and its differentiated nature as part of the way congregations are called to participate in the *missio Dei*, but they do not provide specific input as to how to practically pursue this priority or assess progress made towards that goal. They do not adequately recognize how the pursuit of Church reconciliation strengthens and equips congregations to participate more fully in the *missio Dei*.

Free Church Evangelical Ecclesiological Input

Stanley Grenz's thesis in *Renewing the Centre: Evangelical Theology in a Post-Theological Era*, is that it is in the context of community that beliefs take shape and are rooted. For this reason, "evangelical theology must recapture a credible ecclesiology."²⁹ Grenz explores the roots of evangelicalism's *parachurchicity* and how this has impoverished its understanding of the role of the Church. First, he identifies evangelicalism's way of framing the invisible nature of the Church. By developing a theology which understands conversion experiences to take place directly between God and individuals, the visible form of the Church is cut out of the equation and made largely irrelevant.³⁰ Second, he points to the embrace of denominationalism which is the ecclesiological compromise which declares that no ecclesial body can claim to be the one true Church. Evangelicalism's innovation was to create connections between individuals across the divide of denominations via voluntary societies which came to be

²⁹ Grenz, *Renewing the Center*, 288.

³⁰ Grenz, *Renewing the Center*, 290–292.

known as parachurch organizations.³¹ Grenz contends that we need a more robust alternative way to pursue unity that moves us beyond the default posture of suspicion and separatism.

Grenz outlines a missional community ecclesiology which moves us beyond the overly individualistic way in which evangelicals have tended to understand the Church. Emerging out of the insight that personal identity is communally formed, he shows how communities centered around Word and sacrament shape a collective identity based on the shared narrative of scripture which the Spirit uses to form believers.³² Most significantly for this project, he focuses on the local nature of the Church which leads to understanding the universal Church as the interconnection of all local congregations. A plurality of contextual congregations is central to the vision for unity.³³

He frames the relationship between congregations as organic and relational and centered in God's mission, providing an ecclesiological mandate for prioritizing local unity through shared mission. He does not provide any particulars around method, and he does not delve into the characteristics of the relationships necessary to create such community. His ecclesiological formulations, however, help develop an understanding of why evangelicals have consistently fallen victim to unbiblical sectarianism and points to the necessity of pursuing a more robust expression of Church unity.

In *Exploring Ecclesiology: An Evangelical and Ecumenical Introduction*, a key theme for Brad Harper and Paul Louis Metzger is recognizing how different Church traditions can enrich us with their insights and practices even amidst our disagreements

³¹ Grenz, *Renewing the Center*, 296–300.

³² Grenz, *Renewing the Center*, 314–316.

³³ Grenz, *Renewing the Center*, 312.

with them. They use the metaphor of a mosaic to argue for an ecumenical approach which generously recognizes the beauty of what God is doing in other traditions and allows those alternative perspectives to challenge and bring new insights. They contend that “A theology of unity and peace must undergird our desire for theological accuracy. Thus, we must not stop short at our differences or go around them but go through them to ecumenical dialogue and partnerships.”³⁴ By introducing the eschatological horizon as a central way of framing their work, they are able to point to how God is moving the whole Church towards a future where all that is of God in the various traditions will find its place in the new creation. While they seek to provide practical examples of some of the topics they cover, it was unfortunately beyond the scope of their work to look at what form a local ecumenical initiative might take.

Writing out of what he describes as a conservative Reformed Church context, Peter Leithart, in *The End of Protestantism* declares the current divided state of the Church a defection from the gospel and calls for an end to Protestantism.³⁵ The first three quarters of the book is a systematic critique of the divided state of the Church especially focused on the way that denominationalism has led to a complacent acceptance of division. He calls for us to recognize that pursuing unity is fundamental to the gospel itself and that while this will be painful and slow, obedience demands we engage the challenge.³⁶ In the last section of the book he lays out a potential way forward which he describes with a call to “Reformational Catholicism.” It is a call for the various traditions which make up the Church to move beyond the practice of

³⁴ Harper and Metzger, *Exploring Ecclesiology*,” 283–284.

³⁵ Leithart, *The End of Protestantism*, loc 182.

³⁶ Leithart, *The End of Protestantism*, loc 435.

defining themselves over against other traditions.³⁷ He holds out the idea of federative ecumenism as the best interim way forward toward full reunion. This involves congregations participating in common action without requiring intercommunion and doctrinal uniformity.³⁸ Leithart shares a number of excellent examples of how local unity has developed along the lines of the federative ecumenism that he highlights. He does not, however, explore the details of how such work was done or consider what indicators might give guidance.

Miroslav Volf's formulation of Free Church ecclesiology as laid out in his book *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* is foundational to this project. Free Church ecclesiology, understood the way Volf formulates it, has the space within it to recognize and connect with the diversity of ecclesial models which make up the broader reality of the universal expression of Church. In his introduction Volf observes how different ecclesiologies have been framed and fit well within different social contexts. His contention is that Free Church ecclesiology which gives a greater voice to the broader congregation reflects and connects with the modern context with its expectations of personal freedom and its resistance to hierarchy.³⁹ He describes how there is a process of *congregationalization* happening in all of the various ecclesial models where they are becoming more responsive to the gathered community as they adapt to the modern societal context. He contends that while this does not make Free Church ecclesiology right or best, it does make it important to frame a scripturally faithful, historically informed articulation of this ecclesiology.

³⁷ Leithart, *The End of Protestantism*, loc 935.

³⁸ Leithart, *The End of Protestantism*, loc 2885.

³⁹ Volf, *Likeness*, 13–15.

By grounding each congregation's existence in the eschatological reality of the new creation rather than in subordination to some currently existing broader structure, Volf provides the theological basis for how each congregation exists independently of all others yet still in relationship with each of them on the basis of the common confession of Christ as Savior and Lord. In doing this, he provides an important theological foundation for a Free Church understanding of unity. Volf lays out the principle of *the interecclesial minimum* to describe the necessity of each local church recognizing the ecclesiality of all other local churches as a condition for being a true church.⁴⁰ He writes, "the *openness* of every church toward all other churches [is] an indispensable condition of ecclesiality. . . a church necessarily sets out on the *path* to its future, a path on which it is to express and deepen its communion, that is, its differentiated unity, with all other churches."⁴¹ This principle provides a theological foundation for the pursuit of Church reconciliation.

In the final chapter of the book "The Catholicity of the Church," Volf strengthens and extends this theological foundation by exploring how the qualitative dimension of catholicity, defined by the concept of differentiated unity, is at the core of the historic mark of catholicity.⁴² He contends we must affirm that there is a fundamental relationship between unity and plurality. The Church is a heterogeneous whole, which means that we are called to pursue differentiated unity.⁴³

Here too, he grounds the concept of catholicity in the eschatological reality of the new creation because that is where the true fullness of the faith which is core to

⁴⁰ Volf, *Likeness*, 157.

⁴¹ Volf, *Likeness*, 156–157. Emphasis in the original.

⁴² Volf, *Likeness*, 264–266.

⁴³ Volf, *Likeness*, 262.

catholicity will be realized. The Church is catholic now because the presence of the Spirit of the new creation indwells as first fruits of what will be fullness. It is a catholicity in which the unity of all is coupled with the uniqueness of each person. Since the Spirit is present in the Church only as first fruits, each congregation is only *partially* catholic—no congregation can claim full catholicity for itself. “The eschatological perspective makes possible the distinction, important from an ecumenical point of view, between what might be called the maximum (eschatological) and the minimum (historical) of catholicity.”⁴⁴

Volf identifies two external marks of catholicity as a way to identify which churches are in fact catholic. The first mark is its openness to all other churches. “The minimal requirement for catholicity with regard to relationships between churches is the *openness* of each church to all other churches.”⁴⁵ But he contends that more than the minimum should be pursued. He suggests that “a free networking with those churches” is important.⁴⁶ The second mark is “loyalty to the apostolic tradition” which for the Free Church tradition is a commitment to the apostolic scriptures.

Volf provides a robust Free Church theological formulation for why inter-congregational relationships are vitally important for the well-being of each congregation. And by framing Free Church ecclesiology as one among many valid ways of framing how the Church is to be understood and function, he broadens our grasp of the differentiated unity which characterizes the defining mark of catholicity. It is not

⁴⁴ Volf, “Catholicity of ‘Two or Three,’” 534.

⁴⁵ Volf, *Likeness*, 275. Such openness relates closely to the concept of trust which is central to this project. One way of recognizing and measuring openness is to correlate it with trust.

⁴⁶ Volf, *Likeness*, 275. This encouragingly correlates with my TrueCity network experience.

within the scope of Volf's work to speak to practical ways this can be assessed and lived out, but it provides rich material for working this out more fully.

In *One Lord, One Faith: A Theology for Cross-Denominational Renewal*, Rex Koivisto sets out a theology of unity paying particular attention to the theological concept of catholicity. Koivisto's thesis is that the kind of unity which Scripture calls the Church to pursue is a catholic unity which values diversity as an enriching gift. He contends that the problem of division in the Church is not about there being different groups, but about different groups making mutually exclusive claims to be the best representative of Christianity. This is the problem of sectarianism.⁴⁷

The early part of the book explores the way the New Testament defines the unity God desires as a unity in plurality. This can be seen in the doctrine of spiritual gifts and the doctrine of the Christian conscience.⁴⁸ This understanding is at the root of what the Church in the second century framed with the word *catholicity*. Koivisto contends that the original core meaning was *completeness* and that it was about a posture of inclusivity in relation to the diversity of expressions that had developed.⁴⁹

As the organizational structure of the Church institutionalized this original meaning shifted so that the emphasis of catholicity came to be on being the *true* church rather than the *complete* church. The focus was on uniform structures and practices, and churches which were different were excluded.⁵⁰ He traces how this more exclusive framing of catholicity has held sway over a more inclusive framing for much of Church history with a few notable exceptions, one of which was the innovation of

⁴⁷ Koivisto, *One Lord, One Faith*, 15.

⁴⁸ Koivisto, *One Lord, One Faith*, 37–42.

⁴⁹ Koivisto, *One Lord, One Faith*, 42–44.

⁵⁰ Koivisto, *One Lord, One Faith*, 59.

denominations in the 17th century.⁵¹ For Koivisto denominationalism is the optimal structure for pursuing Church unity. When rightly framed it is the opposite of sectarianism because it acknowledges the validity of multiple ways of being Church and provides for the freedom of conscience necessary for the unity amidst diversity which catholicity is meant to produce.⁵²

The strength of this book is the way Koivisto develops an evangelical theology of catholicity which calls for a generous, inclusive posture towards other Church traditions. He develops a methodology for recognizing and evaluating the way extra-biblical traditions are a part of all Church experiences. While recognizing that there can be harmful traditions, he contends that most Church traditions are of value in specific contexts but are of secondary importance and should not prevent us from being in relationship. He believes that if we rightly hold to the original intent of denominationalism, we can overcome the tendency to sectarianism and reclaim the relational catholicity which is necessary for us to live out God's desired unity. Koivisto contends that such relational catholicity should be tangibly lived out locally within the context of city-Churches where congregations from multiple different denominations cooperatively engage mission in ways which are contextually relevant.

There are two weaknesses which diminish the value of this vision. The first is his overly idealistic framing of the positive role denominations can have. As beneficial as his exploration of the theological roots of denominationalism is, he only recognizes in passing the way sectarianism has taken root in denominational structures. The second weakness is the way that he lays out an ecclesiological perspective which argues for the

⁵¹ Koivisto, *One Lord, One Faith*, 70–71.

⁵² Koivisto, *One Lord, One Faith*, 88–90.

importance of pursuing Church reconciliation locally but does not adequately recognize how this lives in tension with his emphasis on denominationalism. In my experience, denominations self-perpetuate practices which keep congregations from pursuing local unity.

In his book *The City-Wide Church: Unity that God Blesses* Richard Long provides a practical map on how to organize a city-wide unity movement built on the dual conviction that unity is a crucial concern for God and that there is one Church made up of multiple congregations in each city. In the first part of the book Long orients us to the true nature of unity which he defines as “that invisible, but concretely powerful spirit of love among brothers and sisters.”⁵³ He contends that this kind of unity is not uniformity where everyone believes and practices exactly the same things nor is it to be focused on structural union where there are written agreements made between different congregations, but it is to be primarily relational in nature leading to collective action.⁵⁴ Long helpfully identifies trust as a key characteristic of true unity calling it the “currency of the Kingdom,” but would make the important point that a commitment to unity has to go beyond trust to a focus on love because there are times and places where we disappoint each other in ways that makes trust difficult to maintain.⁵⁵ He argues from a survey of the use of the word *church* in the New Testament and from historical patterns of thinking that there is in fact only one Church in each city which will have many congregations as part of it. He then seeks to orient us to what it means for us to live out of that paradigm.⁵⁶

⁵³ Long, *City-Wide Church*, 46.

⁵⁴ Long, *City-Wide Church*, 33–42.

⁵⁵ Long, *City-Wide Church*, 51.

⁵⁶ Long, *City-Wide Church*, 61–69.

In the second part of the book, he lays out three key objectives for how best to pursue unity focusing on relationships, prayer, and evangelism. The section on the need to build relationships parallels much of what this project is looking at though his focus is more narrowly on relationships between pastors rather than on how relationships form between congregations. While he recognizes the importance of trust, he never defines it and does not specifically explore how such trust develops.

Free Church evangelical ecclesiology has been prone to sectarian tendencies and is not known for its commitment to Church unity. And yet as this review indicates, there is a strong chorus of significant voices which give witness to how unity is a crucially important biblical theme which must be attend to. Surprisingly when Free Church ecclesiology embraces a theology of catholicity, it has the potential to create space for a more robust expression of differentiated unity to develop. There are differences of perspective here which require attention. Koivisto believes that the denominationalism that evangelicalism has embraced and fostered holds the key to greater unity while Grenz, and even more so Leithart, believe it is a significant barrier. Helpfully, local expressions of unity are recognized as particularly important, but except for Long, there is little input on what the good indicators of Church reconciliation are and even less exploration of valuable practices for engaging this well.

Additional Ecclesiological Input

There are three additional authors who do not fit specifically in the missional or Free Church streams whose material has provided significant input for this project. These are Robert Schreiter whose work on catholicity has proven foundational, Muthuraj Swamy

who has written a first-hand account of inter-congregational collaboration in the South India context, and Jennifer McClure Haraway whose mixed-methods research on the importance of inter-congregational collaboration to the health of congregations complements the research and findings of this project.

In his book *The New Catholicity: Theology Between the Global and Local*, Robert J. Schreiter explores the greater possibilities inherent within the mark of catholicity and recognizes their relevance for this time in the life of the Church. He believes that with the process of globalization and the rise of reactionary local resistance to its homogenizing impact, catholicity is the characteristic of the Church that we most need to lean into.⁵⁷ With Christianity having become a global reality, it is imperative that the Church find ways to listen well across cultures and bring the diversity of insights into conversation with each other. He lays out the horizons of wholeness and fullness and the necessity of dialogue to navigate the epistemological challenge of intercultural hermeneutics as the attributes being called forth from catholicity.⁵⁸

For Schreiter, *wholeness* is a reference to the extension of Christianity throughout the world.⁵⁹ Wholeness recognizes that all cultures must be involved. There is no culture that the gospel cannot reach and that will not have something of value to add to the Church once the gospel takes root. *Fullness* is concerned with a dynamic, ever-extending orthodoxy that recognizes that each culture brings insights that are essential for grasping all the riches in the gospel. This puts the emphasis on intercultural communication and hermeneutics with a goal of ensuring that the gospel is being

⁵⁷ Schreiter, *The New Catholicity*, 118-119.

⁵⁸ Schreiter, *The New Catholicity*, 128.

⁵⁹ Schreiter, *The New Catholicity*, 128.

transmitted in ways that ensure it is fully received. It calls for more sustained attention to the theological *telos* that the gospel aims to produce. The diversity of the Church means that we will need to recognize and be in dialogue around a number of *teloi* if we are to truly grasp a *telos* that functions across all cultures.⁶⁰ Schreiter posits three particularly promising *teloi* as full human dignity for all, the biblical concept of *shalom*, and the Pauline call to the ministry of reconciliation.⁶¹

In the article, “The Theological Potentials of Local Ecumenical Efforts in Ordinary and Everyday Life: An Ethnographic Study of South Indian Context,” Muthuraj Swamy contributes helpful input for both the ecclesiological and practical dimensions for how local ecumenism happens. Swamy makes the case for the importance of local efforts in the goal of deeper, richer Church unity. He introduces the concept of local ecumenism and provides an orientation in how it has been a topic of conversation for a number of decades but has not been given sufficient attention in ecumenical circles.⁶² He advocates for a local ecumenism that is not simply a top-down effort to apply global ecumenical efforts, but rather one which starts within congregations and emanates outward to other congregations in the same denomination and then to those of other traditions.⁶³ He makes the case that in his context there is a theological commitment to being one in Christ which characterizes local efforts of multiple types from joint worship services to collaborative mission efforts. While there may not be a stated objective of Church unity, there is a theological commitment to this

⁶⁰ Schreiter, *The New Catholicity*, 130-131.

⁶¹ Schreiter, *The New Catholicity*, 131.

⁶² Swamy, “Local Ecumenical Efforts,” 142–144.

⁶³ Swamy, “Local Ecumenical Efforts,” 145–146.

pursuit based on the recognition of their common life in Christ.⁶⁴ Swamy's input points to the lived theological value of a commitment to Church unity which local efforts to engage in ecumenism amid daily life represent. The important question of how to recognize which practices are bearing good fruit is beyond the scope of what he is working on with this article.

Jennifer M. McClure Haraway's research shows that congregations which connect with other congregations are healthier and more vibrant. In her article "Is Together Better? Investigating the Relationship Between Network Dynamics and Congregations' Vitality and Sustainability," she uses quantitative research methods to measure congregational vitality and sustainability and to explore how these relate to congregational involvement in multi-congregation networks. She finds that congregations which bridge between otherwise disconnected congregations have higher vitality and sustainability and that the pastors of congregations which are involved in such networks have greater ministry sustainability.⁶⁵

In her book *No Congregation is an Island: How Faith Communities Navigate Opportunities and Challenges Together*, McClure Haraway explores the viability and impact of involvement in different types of congregational networks which range from intra-denominational to inter-faith.⁶⁶ She finds that involvement in networks where there is little difference between the congregations involved creates a camaraderie between pastors which provides helpful support, but that the similarity between congregations limits the range of creative ideas and beneficial experience of which their

⁶⁴ Swamy, "Local Ecumenical Efforts," 154–156..

⁶⁵ McClure, "Is Together Better?," 468.

⁶⁶ McClure Haraway, *No Congregation is an Island*, 10–12. She also explores the impact of race on the way which networks form and function. This is particularly pertinent in her context in Alabama.

congregations can avail.⁶⁷ For broader networks the opposite holds. There is less camaraderie because of differences but greater access to creative input.⁶⁸

McClure Haraway makes a compelling case for the importance of participation in inter-congregational networks recognizing that it is important to find the appropriate tension between bridging that stretches a congregation but is sustainable. Her research makes a strong case for the importance of the Church reconciliation work that this dissertation is making the case for. She helpfully recognizes how involvement in multi-congregational networks increases trust between congregations, but she never specifically defines trust nor looks at how such participation builds it.⁶⁹ One weakness of her framework is that she jumps from inter-denominational networks which share a theologically conservative ethos to inter-faith networks without considering the possibility of networks which bridge between specifically Christian congregations coming from significantly different theological perspectives. This dissertation argues that networks which call for bridging farther while limiting involvement to specifically Christian congregations are different in crucial ways from the networks she identifies.

The importance of Church unity comes out clearly from a range of authors in the missional and Free Church evangelical ecclesiological literature. There is a recognition that Church unity is a vital dimension of the Christians life and needs to be pursued, that such unity needs to be characterized by a quality of differentiation consistent with its catholic nature, and that it is important for it to be a lived experience in a local context. What it looks like to engage in the kind of Church reconciliation which enriches local

⁶⁷ McClure Haraway, *No Congregation is an Island*, 32–33.

⁶⁸ McClure Haraway, *No Congregation is an Island*, 65–66.

⁶⁹ McClure Haraway, *No Congregation is an Island*, 10.

Church unity, however, is insufficiently conceptualized, and the importance of the role of congregations in this process is not adequately recognized or explored. What is needed is a marker of Church unity which makes clear for those involved that they are actively engaging in the pursuit of Church reconciliation.

Trust

In the context of the TrueCity network it came to be recognized that developing trust between leaders and congregations was an important part of pursuing Church reconciliation. Trust is an under-valued and under-conceptualized characteristic of Church unity. There is a vast body of literature given to theorizing and researching how trust functions in and between organizations, but the significance of this work for providing a tangible way to understand and ground Church unity has not been recognized.

This next section explores the trust literature primarily coming out of the organizational sciences. There is an extensive array of trust literature flowing out of different academic disciplines which is not well integrated or cross-referenced.⁷⁰ The focus here is on the organizational sciences because it is within this discipline that the phenomenon of inter-organizational trust is recognized and explored. This is the form of trust which relates most closely to inter-congregational trust. This section starts by looking at work done to define trust and its antecedents. It next moves to an exploration of the literature on the multi-level nature of trust. It then digs into sources specifically focused on inter-organizational trust and network trust both of which are pertinent to the

⁷⁰ Kroeger, "Trusting Organizations," 744.

way that trust has formed between congregations in Hamilton. The process of boundary spanning is recognized as of particular importance in the process of how trust moves from an inter-personal phenomenon to an inter-organizational one.

Definitions of Trust

In “Not So Different After All: A Cross-Discipline View of Trust,” Denise Rousseau heads up a multi-disciplinary team who co-wrote this article in order to establish a shared understanding of the nature and function of trust so that the various social science disciplines would not work at cross-purposes. The authors succeeded to some extent in their objective since this article provides one of the most often quoted definitions of trust, “Trust is a psychological state comprising the intention to accept vulnerability based upon positive expectations of the intentions or behavior of another.”⁷¹ Beyond this definition the authors surveyed the various disciplines to recognize commonly held perspectives and to note where there were divergent understandings. The article is helpful in establishing a commonly used definition, but otherwise is now dated in its assessment of the field.

In “An Integrative Model of Organizational Trust,” Mayer et al. provide another seminal definition that is used broadly in trust literature. It also established the commonly referenced three-fold summary of the antecedents of trust. Early in the article they introduce their definition of trust, “the willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party based on the expectation that the other will perform a particular

⁷¹ Rousseau et al., “Not So Different,” 395.

action important to the trustor, irrespective of the ability to monitor or control that other party.”⁷²

The second major section of the paper explores the characteristics of the trustor and the trustee which contribute to the development of trust. They postulate that the trustor’s propensity to trust is a stable, general willing disposition.⁷³ They then explore the attributes of the trustee that will lead a trustor to trust them. They frame this under the rubric of trustworthiness and postulate that it can be summarized with three dimensions – ability, benevolence, and integrity. They describe ability as the “skills, competencies, and characteristics that enable a party to have influence within some specific domain.” Benevolence is defined as “the extent to which a trustee is believed to want to do good to the trustor, aside from an egocentric profit motive.” They define integrity as “the trustor’s perception that the trustee adheres to a set of principles that the trustor finds acceptable.”⁷⁴ They then move on to explore the relationship of integrity and benevolence postulating that integrity will be most important early in a relationship while benevolence will become more important over time.

This article provided both the definition of trust (in slightly modified form) and the antecedents of trust which were used in the research for this project. While it was published in 1995, it has continued to have a deep abiding influence on the organizational science field and has been integral to this research project.

In “Consensus on Conceptualizations and Definitions of Trust: Are We There Yet?,” PhytlikZillig and Kimbrough examine the range of definitions of trust looking at

⁷² Mayer et al., “Organizational Trust,” 712.

⁷³ Mayer et al., “Organizational Trust,” 716.

⁷⁴ Mayer et al., “Organizational Trust,” 719.

common essences and variations and disputes. The authors suggest that the field of trust research would be best served by moving away from the quest for one all-encompassing definition of trust, but rather recognize that the multi-faceted nature of trust points towards a trust-as-process perspective.⁷⁵ Such a trust-as-process framing would move away from trying to argue which trusting concept is most valuable and recognize that various concepts are capturing different key attributes of what trust is and how it functions. They believe this is a better way forward than the current situation where the Mayer et al. and Rousseau et al. definitions are the most cited and yet there is not truly consensus in the field around them.

This article contributes to this project first, by highlighting the complexity of the concept of trust and why it is challenging to work from a simple, fully accepted definition. Given that reality, the article verifies that the Mayer et al. and Rousseau et al. definitions which have been used for this project are the most accepted and referenced definitions. Perhaps most importantly the article recognizes that definitions are by nature minimalist and so do not adequately describe the richer reality of trust as a multi-faceted process. This recognition provided helpful input in pointing to the need to focus on the process involved in forming trust more than on simplistic definitions.

Antecedents of Trust

In “Why Do People Trust?: Moving Toward a More Comprehensive Consideration of the Antecedents of Trust,” Baer and Colquitt provide a high-level review of the literature on the factors which contribute to the development of trust which are known

⁷⁵ PytlikZillig and Kimbrough, “Consensus,” 37–41.

as the antecedents of trust. They describe how with the advent and broad acceptance of the Mayer et al. definition of trust, it was recognized that there were aspects of the trustor and trustee's personalities and how they interacted that made trust more likely to develop. They describe three well-established dimensions of antecedents.⁷⁶

The first dimension they refer to as *the disposition to trust*. It is understood to be the generalized expectancy that others can be relied on. The research indicates that the disposition to trust forms early in childhood through the mechanisms of reinforcement and modeling. The propensity to trust is particularly relevant in novel situations before one can assess the trustworthiness of the person needing to be trusted. Its impact diminishes over time as information is gathered.⁷⁷

The second dimension recognizes that there are characteristics of the trustee which make it more likely they will be trusted. This is framed around the concept of trustworthiness and has been understood as the primary determinant of trust. There have been numerous different framings of the characteristics that make up trustworthiness, but increasingly the three-part framing of ability, benevolence, and integrity proposed by Mayer et al. has come to be the most accepted.⁷⁸

In contrast to the trustworthiness dimension, which is understood to be primarily cognitive, the third dimension of the antecedents they describe is affect. It grows out of emotional ties between people and can be viewed as a form of mutual benevolence. It is an umbrella term for the feelings people experience in both in-the-moment states and over more cross-situational ones. This is understood to engender deeper levels of trust

⁷⁶ Baer and Colquitt, "Why Do People Trust?," 163–165.

⁷⁷ Baer and Colquitt, "Why Do People Trust?," 166–168.

⁷⁸ Baer and Colquitt, "Why Do People Trust?," 168–171.

than cognitive types of trust will. Affect is strongly correlated with cognition but is distinct enough to be recognized as a different dimension.⁷⁹

This article provides a very helpful overview of the antecedents of inter-personal trust but does not address how there might be other antecedents at work at more collective levels of trust. Since the primary focus of this project is on the role that inter-personal trust plays in creating inter-congregational trust, the focus on inter-personal antecedents is pertinent though it would have been helpful had the authors recognized the limitations of this focus and named it more clearly. Several other authors suggest potential collective antecedents, but no consensus has yet developed in the literature around which of these are particularly pertinent.⁸⁰

“An Integrative Model of Organizational Trust: Past, Present, and Future” is a follow up review which explores the impact of the authors’ 1995 article (see Mayer et al. above) and responds to areas of trust research development in the field of organizational science. Schoorman et al. (same authors but different lead author) begin by clarifying and extending aspects of their model. They highlight the multi-level nature of trust and how both their definition and work on the antecedents of trust made space for them to apply to different levels whether that be inter-personal, organizational, or inter-organizational.⁸¹ They draw our attention to the ways that *time* was highlighted in their original model. Trust developed over time and the various antecedents had different roles to play at different points in a relationship.⁸² Here they show that

⁷⁹ Baer and Colquitt, “Why Do People Trust?,” 172–174.

⁸⁰ See for example, Mauer, “How to build trust,” Chen et al., “The impact of trust,” and Akrouf and La Rocca, “Interpersonal and Interorganizational Trust.”

⁸¹ Schoorman et al., “Past, Present, and Future,” 345.

⁸² Schoorman et al., “Past, Present, and Future,” 346.

subsequent research has verified this dimension of their work. Another extension has to do with the relationship of trust, risk, and control. They contend that trust is a measure of the willingness to take risk. They view creating controls as an alternative way to manage risk.⁸³ Finally, they contend that measuring the “willingness to be vulnerable” is the heart of measuring trust.⁸⁴ This article helpfully contributes to this project by affirming how their definition and framing of the antecedents makes space for a multi-level framing. Their view of research is slanted toward quantitative work which makes some of the input less helpful.

The Nature of Trust

In his book *Trust: Reason, Routine, Reflexivity*, Guido Möllering aims to go beyond definitions and the exploration of antecedents to engage with the nature of trust itself. He recognizes and agrees with the widely supported definitions of trust from Rousseau et al. and Mayer et al. which frame trust in terms of accepting vulnerability based on positive expectations, but he believes that good definitions do not adequately describe the phenomenon of trust.⁸⁵ He explores three ways of framing what the trust literature understands to be core to the phenomenon of trust – reason, routine, and reflexivity. Each has something to contribute but does not adequately describe the phenomenon completely. He then homes in on a fourth framing, that of a leap of faith or suspension, which he believes gets to the heart of what happens when one individual trusts another.

⁸³ Schoorman et al., “Past, Present, and Future,” 346–347.

⁸⁴ Schoorman et al., “Past, Present, and Future,” 347.

⁸⁵ Möllering, *Trust*, 8–9.

Ultimately, He looks to George Simmel and his framing of the *leap of faith* for a way forward. Möllering prefers to frame the phenomenon as *suspension* because it is by suspending vulnerability and uncertainty as if they were favorably resolved that an actor is able to trust.⁸⁶ He summarizes by stating, “trust is genuinely a question of agency and an idiosyncratic achievement that may be supported or hindered, but not replaced, by social structure or, for that matter, unconscious motivations.”⁸⁷

Having laid out his main paradigm of suspension, Möllering turns his attention to trust research. While he recognizes an on-going role for quantitative research, he contends that qualitative research which can explore the complex, idiosyncratic reality of how embedded actors come to trust is what is most pertinent.⁸⁸ He encouragingly advocates for an emphasis on qualitative methods which parallel what was done for this project.

The strengths of this book are its systematic overview of trust around the paradigms of reason, routine, and reflexivity, and the case made for understanding trust in terms of suspension. A weakness is that while suspension is a helpful framing for capturing the central dynamic of interpersonal trust, it does not provide an adequate framing for the collective levels of trust such as the inter-organizational reality which this project aims to better understand. While he rightly claims that the interpersonal is always a part of the trust picture, it is not the whole picture.

⁸⁶ Möllering, *Trust*, 110.

⁸⁷ Möllering, *Trust*, 126.

⁸⁸ Möllering, *Trust*, 145.

Multi-level Nature of Trust

In “Multilevel Trust: Antecedents and Outcomes of Trust at Different Levels,” Ashley Fulmer explores how trust is a multilevel phenomenon which functions interpersonally, in teams, in organizations, and across society. These levels of trust are inter-related so that the way trust functions at one level is influenced by the other levels and has an influence on those other levels. So, while most trust research has focused on only one level, it is now recognized that it is valuable to consider the impact of these other levels.⁸⁹ The emphasis in the article is on the cross-level factors influencing trust relationships.

The level of analysis aims to identify what the proper level is for analysing a specific research question. It can be at an individual, dyadic, team, organizational, inter-organizational, or societal level. She advocates for a best practice where the theory, measurement, analysis, and implications for the research being done all align with and are appropriate for the level of analysis that is in focus.

This paper provides excellent input on the multi-level nature of trust and the possibilities and challenges of researching across levels. This is particularly pertinent to this project because a key strategy of the research is a cross-level initiative to look at how inter-personal trust between pastors and leaders impacts inter-congregational trust. She raises a key question of how inter-personal trust is related to collective levels of trust but does not point us toward an answer. The weakness of this paper is that it is drawing almost exclusively from quantitative research resources and never addresses

⁸⁹ Fulmer, “Multilevel Trust,” 143–144.

how qualitative input might add to the cross-level and multi-level framings which she highlights.

“A Multilevel Perspective on Organizational Trust” is the introductory chapter to the book *Understanding Trust in Organizations: A Multilevel Perspective*. In laying out the reasons for the book, Gillespie et al. state that the literature on trust has reached a maturity that now allows for the exploration of deeper, more nuanced realities like its multilevel nature.⁹⁰ They contend that to get an accurate picture of how trust functions in the workplace requires a multilevel perspective which can account for the different ways trust works at levels from the individual to teams to relationships between organizations. They unpack the multilevel nature of what they put forward as the *seminal* definition of trust in the organizational literature – “the willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party based upon positive expectations of the intentions or behavior of another” – recognizing that both the trusting party and the party being trusted can be at any of a number of levels.⁹¹ Until recently trust research has tended to focus on a single level. It has generally assumed that the way trust functions at higher levels is the same as at the level of the individual, and that the higher levels are simply composites of the lower ones. They call for theory and research which explores the multilevel nature of trust directly as a way of better understanding the embedded nature of trust and the way that the various levels interact with each other. This article helpfully names the way that different levels of trust interact with each other but does not explore the nature of this interaction.

⁹⁰ Gillespie et al., “A Multilevel Perspective,” 3–4.

⁹¹ Gillespie et al., “A Multilevel Perspective,” 4. This definition is a merging of the definitions of Mayer et al. and Rousseau et al. It is the definition used in the research for this project.

In “Trust Conceptualizations Across Levels of Analysis,” Fulmer and Ostroff explore the research implications of the multi-level reality of trust. The primary thrust of their input is that the different levels of trust require different research approaches. They point out that trust at higher levels has generally been studied with concepts borrowed from the framing of individual trust.⁹² And while the levels are inter-related, they function differently and so need theoretical treatment and research approaches that are specific to the level in focus and aligned with each other.⁹³ In the second half of the article, they explore how trusting an individual is conceptually different than trusting an entity and that people have different ways of calculating trust of an entity which makes it challenging to draw clear conclusions about what creates such trust. They also alert us to how when the trustor is an individual, the trust we are measuring is a psychological state while when the trustor is a collective what we are measuring is perceptual.⁹⁴

This article is helpful in acquainting us with the complexity of multi-level trust research. It provides some important insights especially around the need for the research plan to be aligned appropriately with the level of trust being studied. Here again, though never explicitly stated, the input in this article is primarily framed for quantitative research models. It is unhelpful that they never discuss this, nor give any specific input for qualitative research such as is central for this project.

⁹² Fulmer and Ostroff, “Trust Across Levels,” 14–15.

⁹³ Fulmer and Ostroff, “Trust Across Levels,” 15.

⁹⁴ Fulmer and Ostroff, “Trust Across Levels,” 26–29.

The Interaction of Individual and Collective Forms of Trust

The multi-level nature of trust means that people are simultaneously trusting at both an inter-personal level and at collective levels within the various contexts which are pervasively part of their daily lives. And as these levels interact, they influence each other. Understanding how these levels interact and influence each other is crucial to getting a handle on the way that trust between pastors and congregational leaders is part of the reality of inter-congregational trust. The literature exploring this dynamic is of particular relevance to this project.

In “Trust development across levels of analysis: An embedded-agency perspective,” Lumineau and Schilke advocate for a cross-level model of organizational trust that recognizes how both structural realities influence individuals and how individual agency can shape organizational structural perspectives. They begin by identifying the problem of how trust analysis has traditionally happened at only one level at a time and how there is a tendency to focus exclusively on the individual or the structural when in fact they influence each other.⁹⁵ They propose an *embedded agency* model which recognizes both the top-down way that organizational structures constrain or enable actions as well as the bottom-up way in which individuals can disruptively enact new modes of making trust judgements.⁹⁶ They explore how in the top-down formulations organizational structures shape motivation, influence which information is attended to, and dictate how that information is interpreted, thus influencing the trust judgements of individuals. At the same time in the bottom-up reality individuals can

⁹⁵ Lumineau and Schilke, “Trust Development Across Levels,” 238–239.

⁹⁶ Lumineau and Schilke, “Trust Development Across Levels,” 239–241.

impact trust by using different heuristics than what are the organizational norm thereby changing trust dynamics, especially if the individuals have strong social standing.⁹⁷

This article helpfully names that the top-down and bottom-up influences happen simultaneously. It does not adequately unpack the way that these influences are integrated nor describe the mechanisms that lead to this cross-level reality. This makes it difficult to integrate their insights into how the research for this project was carried out and interpreted.

In “A Cross-Level Process Theory of Trust Development in Interorganizational Relationships,” Schilke and Cook propose a theoretical framework that lays out key constructs and processes at the individual and organizational levels that lead to the development of inter-organizational trust relationships. The article makes several important contributions. First, it lays out an integrative perspective on the inter-play between micro and macro levels of trust. Second, it postulates that the individual role of boundary spanner is a critically important organizational role which bridges toward inter-organizational trust. Third, it establishes how different levels of trust formation are distinct but inter-related. Fourth, it explores how trust evolves over time as the relationship passes through different stages. Fifth, it seeks to substantiate the reality of organization-to-organization trust. And finally, it postulates that there are inter-organizational processes which have a role as antecedents of inter-organizational trust.⁹⁸

As a process theory it aims to set out a narrative explaining how changes take place over time to produce a given outcome. They adopt a life-cycle approach with a progression of four developmental stages. It is a cross-level theory which pays attention

⁹⁷ Lumineau and Schilke, “Trust Development Across Levels,” 241–244.

⁹⁸ Schilke and Cook, “A Cross-Level Process Theory,” 282.

to both the individual and organizational levels of trust over the various stages aiming to explain how inter-organizational trust is established.⁹⁹

The first stage is *relationship initiation* where the focus is on how the individual boundary spanner from one organization establishes relationship with another organization. In this stage prior contact and impressions based on institutional categories provide the basis for initial trust to form.¹⁰⁰ In the second stage which they label *negotiation*, the focus is on the individual-to-individual relationship between the boundary spanners of each organization so the development of inter-personal trust is crucial at this stage. In the third stage which they call *formation*, the focus is once again on how the individual boundary spanner develops trust relationships with the other organization. The key development at this stage is trust transfer from the boundary spanner to the broader organization.¹⁰¹ The fourth stage is called *operation*. At this stage the focus is on organization-to-organization trust. The processes of objectification where the two organizations develop shared social meaning between them and habitualization where internal routines develop which institutionally embed trust in the respective organizations take place at this stage. They posit that these organizational processes which embed trust in the structural reality of the organization are in fact collective antecedents of trust.¹⁰²

This article makes important contributions to this project. First, by showing how individual boundary spanners have a key role to play on behalf of the organizations they are a part of. It provided a framework for making sense of what was coming to the fore

⁹⁹ Schilke and Cook, "A Cross-Level Process Theory," 283–284.

¹⁰⁰ Schilke and Cook, "A Cross-Level Process Theory," 285–288.

¹⁰¹ Schilke and Cook, "A Cross-Level Process Theory," 288–289.

¹⁰² Schilke and Cook, "A Cross-Level Process Theory," 297.

in the data for this project, namely that pastors and other key congregational leaders function representatively of their congregations and how their relationships across congregational boundaries play a crucial role in the way inter-congregational trust is formed. Second, the four-part life-cycle process helpfully unpacked dynamics that the research made clear was happening in the way relationships form between congregations. While there are significant differences, it pointed in a fruitful theoretical direction. Third, their discussion of habitualization and how it leads to trust being embedded in organizational structures helpfully pointed to a pattern coming out in the research data of how trust comes to be embedded in congregational structures beyond the inter-personal trust developed between boundary spanners. A weakness of this article is that there is not much depth to their description of how trust transfers from boundary spanners to broader organizations.

In “Trusting Across Boundaries,” Kroeger and Bachman take these insights a step deeper by conceptualizing the process by which inter-organizational trust functions, framing it as a *meso* process which combines elements of the micro level of inter-personal trust and the macro level of systems trust.¹⁰³ It is the crucial role of boundary spanners, that develop the linkages between organizations.

They highlight three primary functions of boundary spanners. First is their instrumental business function of facilitating the organizations to work together. Second, they absorb uncertainty in the relationship between the two organizations.

¹⁰³ Systems trust is a collective form of trust which describes how people come to trust in the systems they are embedded in within organizations and with broader societal institutions.

Third, they play a representative function. They represent the organization to external partners, and they represent external partners to the organization they work as part of.¹⁰⁴

In laying out the logic of inter-organizational trust, the authors show how it is a type of systems trust, but that because the organization is identified with specific people, there is a predictability to how it functions that is along the lines of interpersonal trust.¹⁰⁵ They introduce the term *facework* to describe the way a boundary spanner provides a face for the organization. Their role and position are laid out for them by the organization and yet they have a certain amount of freedom to bring their own personality into the mix. They relate both as an individual and on behalf of the organization. The differentiation between the two is often unclear.¹⁰⁶

For boundary spanners to do their work well there is a certain amount of role autonomy with which they need to function. External partners come to trust boundary spanners based in part on the leeway they have in interpreting and enacting their roles. But boundary spanners also must span boundaries within their own organizations. The way they come to have role autonomy is by developing trust with those within their organization. The more they are trusted within their organization, the more autonomy they have in functioning outside of it so intra-organizational trust is key to inter-organizational trust.¹⁰⁷ And also, the converse, if they develop a strong track-record for delivering based on their inter-organizational trust then their intra-organizational trust

¹⁰⁴ Kroeger and Bachmann, "Trusting Across Boundaries," 254.

¹⁰⁵ Kroeger and Bachmann, "Trusting Across Boundaries," 257–258.

¹⁰⁶ Kroeger and Bachmann, "Trusting Across Boundaries," 260–261.

¹⁰⁷ Kroeger and Bachmann, "Trusting Across Boundaries," 261–263.

increases. Even so they face a consistent challenge in that external partners will be looking for role autonomy while internal partners will be looking for conformity.¹⁰⁸

This article insightfully lays out how boundary spanning sits at the very core of the phenomenon of inter-organizational trust. By laying out how inter-organizational trust functions at the *meso* level between interpersonal trust and structural trust and showing how the role that boundary spanners have in this unfolds, the authors provide a powerful paradigm for better understanding inter-organizational trust.

In the closely related article, “Trusting Organizations: The Institutionalization of Trust in Interorganizational Relationships,” Kroeger explores the ways that organizations can be both objects and subjects of trust. He starts by naming the bias in the literature to treat organizational trust as either primarily an individual phenomenon or a structural one. His objective is to unpack how it is both and look at the mechanisms and processes that link the two.¹⁰⁹ In the first major section, he looks at how organizations are objects of trust. He covers much the same territory he did in “Trusting Across Boundaries” highlighting the important role of boundary spanners and how their engagement in facework translates individual trust into organizational trust.¹¹⁰

In the second half of the paper, he lays out how organizations come to trust other organizations through the process of institutionalization. First, he looks at how institutionalized trust is produced when patterns of individual trust come to be understood as typical, becoming habitualized within the organization. Once third parties take on the patterns, they become externalized and objectified, but it can only persist if

¹⁰⁸ Kroeger and Bachmann, “Trusting Across Boundaries,” 265–266.

¹⁰⁹ Kroeger, “Trusting Organizations,” 743–744.

¹¹⁰ Kroeger, “Trusting Organizations,” 749.

it is regularly brought to life in creative interactions.¹¹¹ Second, he lays out how institutionalized trust gets reproduced through the creation of what he calls *trust templates*. Once specific trusting actions come to be expected it creates a stability to how these templates get passed along, resulting in actions consistent with the templates which then further enable future actions. Third, he describes how such institutionalized trust is transmitted to subsequent generations of actors. Once trust patterns become detached from the original relationships that created them, they become externalized and function as organizational facts which makes them easier to transmit.¹¹²

This paper makes two major contributions to this project. First, it reiterates and fills in more detail on the role boundary spanners have in developing inter-organizational trust through their participation in facework. Second, it flips the script and theorizes on how organizations come to trust other organizations through the process of institutionalization. This provides a credible narrative for how trust comes to be embedded in congregational structures so that it is not just one or two key individuals who trust on behalf of the whole.

Network Trust

Network trust provides another frame of reference for understanding collective trust. The article “The Tangled Ties of Trust: A Social Network Perspective on Interpersonal Trust” explores the way that social networks influence interpersonal trust. Jones and Shah start by recognizing that interpersonal trust requires a trustor who decides whether to trust, a trustee who is the target of such trust and the dyad in which these dynamics

¹¹¹ Kroeger, “Trusting Organizations,” 755–756.

¹¹² Kroeger, “Trusting Organizations,” 758.

play out. They contend, however, that research of interpersonal trust has erred by trying to isolate these three aspects from the broader social context in which they exist. They advocate for a social network perspective on interpersonal trust which recognizes that in addition to the relational reality of how trust forms and functions, there is also a structural component for which network theory provides a means to recognize and understand the dynamics at work at multiple levels in a social field.¹¹³

The heart of this article is the section where they look at which aspects of social networks impact on trustors, trustees, and dyads. For trustors the emphasis is on how social network characteristics influence their trust of others. They focus on how a trustor's position in the network affects the degree to which they trust others, how quickly trust forms, and how accurately it is perceived.¹¹⁴ The trustee section explores how the size of a trustees' network and how much it overlaps with those of their advocates affects the extent to which they are trusted. They recognize how being in the position of a trust broker can be detrimental to the extent that someone is trusted because of the differing expectations of the groups they link between.¹¹⁵ For dyads they look at how social networks influence mutual trust. They highlight how homophily and proximity describe the conditions under which trust relationships develop, and how the network assessment concepts of symmetric and asymmetric ties describe an important reality in how trust dyads work. They explore how the network surrounding a dyad plays a role in the way trust develops within the dyad especially through cohesive referents, third-party ties, and structural equivalents.¹¹⁶

¹¹³ Jones and Shah, "The Tangled Ties of Trust," 205–207.

¹¹⁴ Jones and Shah, "The Tangled Ties of Trust," 213–215.

¹¹⁵ Jones and Shah, "The Tangled Ties of Trust," 215–217.

¹¹⁶ Jones and Shah, "The Tangled Ties of Trust," 217–219.

In the next section they look at the converse perspective, exploring how interpersonal trust influences social networks. They note that this is a less studied perspective. They contend first that interpersonal trust affects the diffusion of trust in a network by increasing density through trust transferability. Second, they suggest that interpersonal trust plays an important role in how structural holes are managed by brokers and liaisons. Lastly, they argue that interpersonal trust builds multiplex ties which strengthen networks.¹¹⁷

They end the article by noting that because of how highly socialized the phenomenon of trust is and how it is embedded in a complex web of relationships, social network theory provides an important way to better understand the complexity of what is taking place.¹¹⁸ This research project bears this out as the TrueCity network creates a context where inter-personal trust is incubated between pastors and other congregational leaders who would otherwise not connect with each other.

The article “Network Trust,” lays out a theoretical basis for the reality that trust forms indirectly based on what we come to learn of others from individuals we trust and our experience in social contexts where trust is prevalent. McEvily et al. define network trust as “generalized positive expectations about the motives, intentions, and behavior between actors who are not directly connected to each other but are part of a bounded social structure.”¹¹⁹

They conceptualize network trust as made up of two elements, second-hand trust and prototrust. *Second-hand trust* is defined as “the partial spillover of relational trust to

¹¹⁷ Jones and Shah, “The Tangled Ties of Trust,” 220–223.

¹¹⁸ Jones and Shah, “The Tangled Ties of Trust,” 223–225.

¹¹⁹ McEvily et al., “Network Trust,” 182.

socially proximate, indirectly connected actors to the n^{th} degree of separation, albeit with decay.”¹²⁰ It takes place when one or more intermediate third parties act as proxies for trust between two disconnected parties. This is directly connected to the network science phenomenon known as transitivity.

The second element that defines network trust is *prototrust*. The authors define this as the “conditions giving rise to the emergence of confident positive expectations between any two actors in a network, although it may or may not evolve into relational trust.”¹²¹ Although prototrust is not actually trust it still creates the conditions under which two actors might make themselves vulnerable to each other. It is based on assumed expectations of trustworthy behavior and the capacity of the network to connect members with compatible interests. The potential for prototrust increases based on how well the network is understood to be capable of matching members in mutually beneficial ways.¹²²

Having defined network trust and explored the contributing elements, the authors go on to postulate some of the effects of network trust and how it relates to other theories of trust. They describe how network trust moves the element of risk-taking beyond individual relationships and distributes it across the various relationships which make up the network. They postulate that if networks create second-hand trust and prototrust they first, expand the trust-like advantages in a way which makes network trust a substitute for relational trust, and second, by embedding individual trust

¹²⁰ McEvily et al., “Network Trust,” 185.

¹²¹ McEvily et al., “Network Trust,” 190.

¹²² McEvily et al., “Network Trust,” 190–194.

relationships in a broader context of relationships they create a complement to relational trust.¹²³

They conclude the article by discussing how network trust provides a nuanced middle ground between the psychological emphasis on inter-personal trust and sociological emphasis on the role of structures in how trust works. They see network trust as having the potential to better bridge the gap within the research between the work that has been done to describe trust at the individual level and what has been done to describe it at an organizational and inter-organizational level.¹²⁴ This is a contention which this project aims to implement in describing how pastors and other congregational leaders have come to trust each other through their participation in the TrueCity network.

Conclusion

Church reconciliation is a Spirit-led process which breaks down the walls which divide the Church so that enriched unity results. Congregations play a central role in the life of the Church, and how they relate to each other is crucial to the quality of unity experienced. It is important for congregations to engage Church reconciliation as it is a crucial part of enriching differentiated Church unity. The missional and Free Church evangelical ecclesiological voices surveyed affirm this reality, but none of them provides a means for recognizing how the Church is doing in this pursuit.

Inter-congregational trust provides an indicator of when Church reconciliation is being fruitfully pursued. It allows one to better assess how robust unity is in a city

¹²³ McEvily et al., “Network Trust,” 194–198.

¹²⁴ McEvily et al., “Network Trust,” 199.

context. Trust is recognized in the organizational sciences as a key characteristic of relational health. By exploring work done to define trust, unpack its antecedents, recognize its multi-level nature, dig into its inter-organizational and network levels and understand how those levels interact with inter-personal trust, we have laid a foundation for recognizing the process by which trust between congregations develops.

Schilke and Cook's theory of inter-organizational trust development with its recognition of the important role of boundary spanners connects with Kroeger and Bachmann's exploration of the importance of *facework* for how such boundary spanners build inter-organizational trust. And this connects to Jones and Shah's work on the important role that networks play in how inter-personal trust is formed. By weaving all of this together and using it to unpack the input from pastors and other congregational leaders on how they have come to trust those who are part of other congregations within a network of congregations, the pastoral and congregational practices which fruitfully increase trust and thereby build up Church unity can be more readily recognized.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND FINDINGS— CULTIVATING INTER-CONGREGATIONAL TRUST THROUGH A BOUNDARY SPANNING PROCESS

The first half of the last chapter interacted with a range of missional and Free Church evangelical authors all of whom affirm the importance of Church unity and give more depth to contentions that Church unity is a process which only reaches fullness in the new creation, requires a diversity of congregational expressions characteristic of the qualitative dimension of catholicity, and needs to be grounded in a local setting. It then explored the organizational science trust literature with the contention that this literature relates most closely to how trust develops between congregations. This range of input proved useful for the work of analyzing the research data for this project. It provided concepts and language which fruitfully contributed to the way in which the grounded theory put forward by this project was framed that congregational leaders through the process of boundary spanning develop inter-congregational trust which is an important way to participate in the Spirit's on-going work of catalyzing Church reconciliation.

This chapter starts by laying out the research methodology of critical realist grounded theory and describing how it is used to gather and analyze this project's data. Next, the concept of inter-congregational trust is more fully explicated and the five phase boundary spanning process theory that emerged from the research is presented. This theory shows how pastors and other lay leaders build inter-congregational trust

through engaging in the trust embedding social practices (TESPs) associated with each of the five phases.

Critical Realist Grounded Theory

Critical realist grounded theory is one of a constellation of types of grounded theory. The various types of grounded theory share a history and a group of methods but differ in their epistemological presuppositions in ways which shift how the various core methods are combined and used. Grounded theory is a research methodology well suited for generating theoretical insights for processes which are not already covered in the academic literature and have not been studied extensively.

Barney Glasser and Anselm Strauss pioneered the use of the grounded theory methodology in the 1960s.¹ The development of grounded theory showed that qualitative research could do more than simply provide rich descriptions, it could generate good theory.² Grounded theory seeks to bridge the gap between theory and research. Rather than developing a theory and then deductively designing research to verify it, in grounded theory, the theory emerges from the research process itself so that it is *grounded* in the data of what is explored. It advocates for a method of constant comparison which breaks data down into pieces through a process of coding and then develops analytical categories as the pieces are brought into dialogue with each other.³ Many of the original methods and perspectives developed by Glasser and Strauss continue to characterize the various forms of grounded theory such as the simultaneous

¹ Creswell and Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry*, 82.

² Charmaz, *Constructing*, 8.

³ Corbin and Strauss, *Basics*, 7.

involvement in data collection and analysis; developing codes from the data rather than importing preconceived codes; memo-writing to describe categories and their relationships to each other; and developing theory as one proceeds through each stage of data collection and analysis.⁴ There is a range of ways in which grounded theory gets practiced depending on the philosophical foundation that the researcher ascribes to, ranging from the positivistic approach that Glasser championed which fuses ontology and epistemology to a social constructivist approach, identified most closely with the work of Kathy Charmaz, which questions any access to ontology. Critical realism contends for a middle ground which holds forth an ontological realism which is only secondarily accessible to the varied epistemologies that are used to comprehend it.

The way critical realism holds the creative tension between ontological realism and epistemological relativism is by arguing for a stratified understanding of reality, recognizing three domains – the empirical, the actual, and the real. The *empirical* domain is what one has access to through the five senses and is made up of perceptual experiences.⁵ Andrew Root labels this the *dependent subjective layer* which helpfully calls attention to how it is defined by individual and relationally shared experiences. Perceptions of these experiences have validity, but do not provide the whole picture of what is going on.⁶ The empirical level of the research findings for this project focuses on the way that church leaders and congregations as a whole engage in TESP to develop inter-personal and inter-congregational trust. Such TESP are framed based on

⁴ Charmaz, *Constructing*, 7–8.

⁵ Hoddy, “Empirical Research,” 112.

⁶ Root, *Christopraxis*, 206. Root is following the work of Christian Smith, and Margret Archer in framing these layers of reality in this way. See Smith, *What Is a Person?*, and Archer, *Realist Social Theory*.

a view of *practices* which understand them as meaningful clusters of human activity constructed piecemeal over the course of messy realities of social relations which constantly adapt to changing circumstances.⁷ The practices in focus embed trust first into the lives of representative leaders who function as boundary spanners and then through them into the culture of the congregations. These practices are the relationally shared experiences which are open to the interpretation of each of the different congregational leaders.

The *actual* domain is made up of events and processes which occur regardless of whether they are observed or not. Root labels this domain the *dependent objective layer* and connects it to socially constructed realities that have their basis in human perception but take on a life of their own. They are objective because they exist beyond the subjective, but they are dependent because they are constructed out of human perception and can be deconstructed as well.⁸ The contention in this dissertation is that the process of boundary spanning which is laid out functions as part of the actual domain. This process describes the way in which congregations come to trust each other.

The *real* domain is where causal structures exist. Root labels this domain the *independent objective layer* because it exists independent of whether the human mind conceives of it or not.⁹ Unlike social constructivism, critical realism recognizes the existence of and secondary access to this domain. It would hold, however, that while theories can seek to describe how this domain functions, those theories themselves do not exist at this level.

⁷ Tanner, "Christian Practices," 230. This definition follows the social scientific conversation about practices particularly owing to the work of Pierre Bourdieu. See Bass, "Introduction," 6.

⁸ Root, *Christopraxis*, 208.

⁹ Root, *Christopraxis*, 213.

The real domain is of particular relevance for the work of Practical Theology because this is the layer postulated about when theological work is engaged. The theory being put forward here that focusing on the development of inter-congregational trust is crucial to the witness and worship of the Church because of how it relates to the differentiated unity God is at work developing, sets out a view of how God has ordered the real. In providing a methodology which opens the possibility of developing such theories, critical realist grounded theory is well suited to the task of doing Practical Theology.

Data Gathering

The second edition of Kathy Charmaz's book *Constructing Grounded Theory* gave primary direction to how this grounded theory research project was carried out.¹⁰ Grounded theory research begins with the quest for rich data. There are many methods which can be used to obtain this data, but most often it comes through the use of interviews. Charmaz discusses other methods but identifies intensive, semi-structured interviews as the method which fits grounded theory best because both require an approach which is "open-ended yet directed, shaped yet emergent, and paced yet unrestricted."¹¹ In addition, semi-structured, intensive interviews were chosen for this project because this method fit best with a commitment to doing practice-led research. It also mirrors my core vocational practice of setting up meetings with congregational leaders to understand from their perspective what is unfolding in their congregations

¹⁰ The fourth edition of Juliet Corbin and Anselm Strauss' *Basics of Qualitative Research* was also consulted as well as Eric Hoddy's article "Critical Realism in Empirical Research" and Amber Fletcher's "Applying Critical Realism in Qualitative Research."

¹¹ Charmaz, *Constructing*, 85.

and the city they are a part of. These interviews were done whenever possible in the office of the person being interviewed. This too is consistent with my regular practice as I have found that being on the *home turf* of those I am connecting with creates a more generative climate for the interactions.

A first round of twenty-two semi-structured interviews were done with individuals I know who are church pastors or lay leaders. They were chosen because of their experience developing relationships between the congregations they lead and other congregations. In choosing who to approach for interviews I sought to have a range of input from different denominations, different sizes of congregations, different length of involvement in a church network, and a good gender mix. While the emphasis was on finding people based in Hamilton who had experience within the TrueCity network, I also wanted to find people with experience in other city contexts. Because my primary goal was to understand the process of trust forming between congregations within the TrueCity network, having a sample primarily made up of TrueCity involved leaders provided sufficient input.¹² By interviewing over 20 people, I had a sample size considered more than adequate for good Grounded Theory practice.¹³

As the category of boundary spanning emerged from the research, I realized that everyone I was interviewing functioned in this role for their congregation. Fourteen current pastors, two former pastors, and six lay leaders were interviewed. Of the twenty-two participants, there were fourteen males (9 pastors, 3 former pastors, and 2 lay leaders) and eight females (4 pastors and 4 lay leaders). Of the pastors interviewed the

¹² Theoretical saturation is the primary goal for Grounded Theory, and this is achieved by doing enough interviews so that your research categories are well established and so that you are not getting new input from subsequent interviews. See Charmaz, *Constructing*, 108.

¹³ Charmaz, *Constructing*, 107.

average time in their role was 11.6 years with a median of 8.5 years. One pastor served in his role for 30 years. This was the longest tenure. The shortest was 4 years. The lay leaders interviewed have been part of their congregations longer. The average was 24 years, and the median was 28 years. They have not always been in formal leadership roles over the time in their congregations. Nineteen of the participants are from Hamilton and are part of congregations involved in the TrueCity network. The three other interviews were with leaders with experience of congregational networks in other cities. A set email was used to invite people to participate. It informed them that the project was exploring how trust forms between congregations and shared a few sample questions.

An interview guide was developed which consisted of an introduction to the research and then a series of starting, intermediate, and ending questions. Input from Charmaz about how to shape questions that focus on processes and actions was very helpful in this endeavor. She also advised revising the guide as one comes to understand better what questions prove helpful and which ones do not.¹⁴ The guide was revised quite often in the early stages of the research, but less so as more interviews were done. The introductory comments gave some context by informing the participant of the assumption that there is a relationship between Church unity and trust, but that this would be explored more later in the interview. They were also informed that there would not be specific questions about the TrueCity network but that they were free to share about their experience of the network when it felt relevant. This was done so they were not obligated to discuss the work for which they know I have primary responsibility.

¹⁴ Charmaz, *Constructing*, 62–68.

The starting questions explored basic details of their leadership situation. Initially I thought I could ask some general introductory questions about inter-congregational relationships to set the stage for asking more specifically about trust, but I found that those interviewed did not differentiate significantly between congregations generally relating and specifically trusting so these questions did not provide helpful insights. Over time it was found that it worked better to keep the introductory section brief.

I started the intermediate section by sharing a definition of trust and introducing the idea that trust has multiple layers from inter-personal to organizational to general social trust. This created a context for a focus on their experience of how trust has formed between congregations. They were then asked to relate stories of how they had seen trust form between their congregation and another and followed up by exploring how trust formed between the pastors of these congregations and how this impacted overall trust. Participants were generally more comfortable reflecting on individual trust between leaders than the collective trust between congregations. As I came to understand better the crucial role that boundary spanning plays in how inter-organizational trust forms, there was greater freedom to focus on the individual trust formation process. A section was added that explored the trust antecedent of trustworthiness and what made another pastor more trustworthy. I came to find that theological trust was a significant factor and so specific questions were added to the interview guide along these lines.

In my original thesis proposal, the theological concept of catholicity was operationalized in terms of developing trust across differences expecting that in the

interviews how trust formed between congregations that were different from each other could be explored. Instead, it was found that when people are asked about trust they naturally focus on what is held in common, and resist paying attention to differences, so these questions proved disorienting. And introducing the rarely discussed concept of catholicity exacerbated this effect. So, I changed tack and asked more specifically about the connection of trust and Church unity instead. While all those interviewed accepted that trust and unity are related and that unity is important, there was general uncertainty about how best to define unity and what it requires of us.

Data Analysis

In grounded theory the stages of data analysis interweave with the data gathering process. Interviews were coded as soon as they were completed, and this initial data analysis work informed subsequent data gathering interviews. The interviews were recorded and transcripts developed using the EnjoyHQ website. The transcripts were compared to the recordings and edited as needed. The transcripts were anonymized by assigning a pseudonym to each person interviewed. Names were used that are not represented among the leaders involved in TrueCity. The transcripts were then uploaded into the MaxQDA qualitative data analysis software where initial coding was done.

As an iterative, comparative, and interactive method, grounded theory aims to have the researcher continuously relating to the data. The initial coding process is at the heart of how this works.¹⁵ Through coding the data the researcher's perspectives are brought into conversation with those of the participants with the aim of getting inside

¹⁵ Charmaz, *Constructing*, 115.

their way of thinking.¹⁶ Charmaz recommends coding all the data line by line to force the researcher to keep in touch with the data.¹⁷ During initial coding the goal is to stay open to all potential theoretical directions. Charmaz encourages keeping codes short and using them to preserve the processes and actions found in the data. She challenges researchers to compare the various perspectives that emerge from the data and to pay attention to those places where they have different perspective from the respondent, recognizing the researchers view as one among many.¹⁸ She suggests that it is particularly powerful to use the participant's own words to capture key insights through using *in vivo* codes.¹⁹ Coding interviews as I went alerted me to areas of significant input and places where there were gaps in the data. It was mostly on this basis that the interview guide was revised.

Part way through the process of doing the interviews, before all the initial coding was finished, I found that I needed to start in on the second phase of focused coding to keep the code list manageable. Focused coding is the process of choosing significant initial codes or devising codes that subsume numerous initial codes.²⁰ This fit with the emergent nature that Charmaz suggests is part of the coding process. She indicates that one will go back and forth between initial and focused coding.²¹ One will find some initial codes which appear more frequently or have greater significance and these codes will be used to sift, sort, and synthesize large amounts of data.²² By the time I finished my first round of interviews I had narrowed my code list down, but had not yet found

¹⁶ Charmaz, *Constructing*, 114–115.

¹⁷ Charmaz, *Constructing*, 124.

¹⁸ Charmaz, *Constructing*, 132–133.

¹⁹ Charmaz, *Constructing*, 134.

²⁰ Charmaz, *Constructing*, 138.

²¹ Charmaz, *Constructing*, 141.

²² Charmaz, *Constructing*, 140.

the core category which brought coherence and direction to the data, and from which a grounded theory could be constructed.

Memo-writing is a grounded theory method that runs parallel to and interweaves with the process of coding. As Charmaz explains, “Memos chart, record, and detail a major analytic phase of our journey. They actively engage the materials, develop ideas, and engage in reflexivity.”²³ Memos were used to capture ideas found coming from the data as the process of interviewing continued and the initial coding was done. From early in the process the importance of inter-personal trust building between leaders stood out as significant. An early memo observed, “Leaders generally and pastors specifically are crucial for structural connections to happen – the individual relationships between them are crucial for the formation of inter-congregational trust.” Only later as more interaction with the trust literature happened did this insight get connected to the process of boundary spanning as it was first encountered in Schilke and Cook’s article and then later in Kroeger’s work, recognizing it as the core category.²⁴ Most of the significant categories which have given structure to the findings originated from memos written as the coding process was engaged.²⁵

Second interviews were done with eight participants to do theoretical sampling of the core category and other key analytical categories. Theoretical sampling is a method for strengthening core categories by gathering more data. Charmaz describes it as the process of “seeking and collecting pertinent data to elaborate and refine

²³ Charmaz, *Constructing*, 162.

²⁴ Schilke and Cook, “A Cross-Level Process Theory,” Kroeger and Bachmann, “Trusting Across Boundaries,” and Kroeger, “Trusting Organizations.”

²⁵ See the code map in the appendix for more details on what form the coding for this project eventually took.

categories in your emerging theory.”²⁶ Once tentative ideas are constructed about the significant categories emerging from the data these ideas are examined through further inquiry.²⁷ This was done through conducting second interviews with people whose initial interviews had provided particularly helpful input.

Once the boundary spanning process was identified as the core category, the four-phase progression from inter-personal to inter-organizational trust development which both Schilke and Cook and Kroeger and Bachman highlight provided a fruitful paradigm for exploring the story the data was telling.²⁸ There was a great deal of material which was relevant to the second inter-personal trust development phase where such trust forms between congregational leaders. There was also a significant amount of data representative of how congregations fruitfully interact. This was characteristic of Schilke and Cook’s fourth phase where organizations come to trust each other.²⁹ Material was lacking however for the third phase where boundary spanners work within their own organization to develop trust of the other organization. This had not been explored much in the first round of interviews so there was little on how the leaders do their boundary spanning work within their own congregations. This became an important area to explore in doing the theoretical sampling work through second interviews.

It became clear as well that the first phase of the boundary spanning picture painted by Schilke and Cook where one organization seeks out a relationship with a

²⁶ Charmaz, *Constructing*, 192.

²⁷ Charmaz, *Constructing*, 199.

²⁸ Schilke and Cook, “A Cross-Level Process Theory,” 284; Kroeger and Bachmann, “Trusting Across Boundaries,” 261–262.

²⁹ Schilke and Cook, “A Cross-Level Process Theory,” 284.

specific other organization did not match up well with how congregations relate.³⁰ There were very few examples of congregations seeking a bilateral relationship with one other specific congregation.³¹ Instead, what the data showed is that the process of developing inter-congregational trust flowed from and eventually back into network relationships between multiple congregations and congregational leaders. The importance of this involvement in church networks for how trust developed between leaders and then between congregations came up early on in the research process as significant. This created a dilemma as I had chosen not to ask questions directly about TrueCity because doing so would place respondents in a challenging position given the focus of my work developing this church network. I chose to continue to stay away from such questions in my first interviews, but then was able to explore it in second interviews by explaining how the input had come up in the research.

The second interviews confirmed the core category of boundary spanning, strengthened the understanding of how boundary spanners work within their own congregations to form trust for other congregations, and confirmed and strengthened the network trust categories. These interviews also shifted and deepened the understanding of how theological trust develops.

Inter-Congregational Trust

This research project was an attempt to understand what created the robust Church unity experienced through the start-up and development of the TrueCity network which

³⁰ Schilke and Cook, "A Cross-Level Process Theory," 285–287.

³¹ The term "bilateral" is being used to denote the exclusive relationship between two congregations in contrast to network contexts where congregations simultaneously relate to multiple other congregations.

centered around the strengthened relationships between congregations. The congregations involved in this network came to understand themselves as being positively connected for the purpose of being “churches together for the good of the city.”³² Over time this positive connection came to be associated with increased trust. At the heart of the TrueCity network there was growing relational trust between a group of congregational leaders from the various congregations that were getting involved. But somehow this inter-personal trust was extending beyond this group of leaders to their broader congregations. Recognizing how this trust was functioning at a collective level led to it being framed in terms of inter-congregational trust. It was weak and fragile and so we regularly were looking for ways to strengthen it, but its existence made clear that our intention to have congregations come into relationship with each other was indeed happening. Having come to recognize inter-congregational trust as core to the Church unity being experienced, it felt important to better understand how it develops. This was as the heart of the motivation to center it for this project. What the research for this project came to identify was the process by which the relational trust which formed between pastors and other church leaders catalyzed the formation of structural trust embedded in congregational cultures.

Pastor Gord described this inter-congregational trust formation when he shared, “And we already know their names, their faces, we know they're a part of a certain church and we trust that reputation that that church has, which I think opens the doors

³² “Churches Together for the Good of the City” is the tagline for the TrueCity network which was established the year the network started in 2004.

for some of that kind of cross church work.”³³ Pastor Nancy expanded on it further when she related how such trust develops,

I think that that's how inter-congregational trust starts is you have some contact that goes well, and then you open the door a little bit to a little more contact. You meet others from that church and suddenly you're like, oh, these people are of like mind. And then slowly my perspective begins to change. And I was gonna say, probably until I hit somebody who puts me off, but that's not necessarily true. If I'm in enough, know enough people in a congregation, have enough of a trust built, then even if I have a bad experience, I can narrate that into a story in a way that doesn't shut me down.

The Practical Theology literature has not focused on understanding the nature of inter-congregational trust, how it forms, or its importance in how Church unity in a local context is enriched.³⁴ Organizational Science is the discipline which has explored the closest parallel concept with the extensive work done to understand the nature and functioning of inter-organizational trust.³⁵ Building on Mayer et al.’s definition of trust, Schilke and Cook state that “inter-organizational trust refers to one organization’s expectation that another organization will not take advantage of the trusting organization’s vulnerabilities.”³⁶ Kroeger and Bachmann deepen the conversation about the nature of this kind of trust by recognizing how it functions at a *meso* level somewhere between interpersonal micro-trust and systemic macro-trust. They helpfully unpack how organizational trust is trust placed in a social system. While at the same time, because organizations are discreet entities which often get represented by and

³³ The research explored in this project is anonymized. This name and the others used throughout this dissertation are pseudonyms. It felt pertinent to recognize when a quote is from someone in a pastoral role and so the term “Pastor” is used as prefix where applicable.

³⁴ In her book *No Congregation is an Island*, Jennifer M. McClure Haraway regularly references the importance of trust in the way that inter-congregational relationships form and function, but she never explores the nature of such trust or how it forms.

³⁵ See for example Fulmer, “Multilevel Trust,” 150–151.

³⁶ Schilke and Cook, “A Cross-Level Process Theory,” 282.

identified with specific people, organizational trust functions similarly to inter-personal trust in important ways.³⁷

Inter-congregational trust functions similarly but with even more of an emphasis on inter-personal relationships. Congregations are social systems but come to be identified with specific people. The inter-personal trust that develops between key representatives of congregations gets generalized to the relationship between those congregations. This is what Pastor Janice was talking about when she shared,

So, what we're really asking people to make space for is more relationship to an entity. Mostly, like for pastors they'll actually, know the other pastors, I know the leadership, but I think when you get to the congregation, it's mostly being friends with another congregation as an idea, I might not personally know anyone from that congregation, but I hear us talk about that congregation and sometimes we pray for them. So, I know ideologically that this other congregation is an entity that we as a church have a relationship with.

Alan is pointing in the same direction when he said,

Then there are smaller opportunities to connect where there's more intentionality like the 3dm discipleship piece which was for me very powerful. Just by being in a group with leaders from other churches a high level of trust and a high level of vulnerability developed. And so when you get to that place with a leader of another church and you say, well, I can trust this organization because I trust their leaders.

Because relationships are so central to a congregation's reason for being and how it carries out its mandate, the focus on the inter-personal trust building between these representatives is even more pronounced than in other organizational settings. Inter-congregational trust is functioning when the trusting congregation expects that another congregation with which they have come to associate desire their flourishing and will

³⁷ Kroeger and Bachman, "Trusting Across Boundaries," 257.

act accordingly. The task then is to map more specifically how this process of inter-congregational trust development happens.

Boundary Spanning Process

The research process for this project led to the conclusion that the way inter-congregational trust develops can be mapped out by paying attention to the primary process by which congregations come to relate to each other. It is the process of boundary spanning. The grounded theory being proposed based on the research is that inter-congregational trust develops through a five-phase boundary spanning process which starts with the formation of relational trust between representative leaders and results in inter-congregational trust being embedded in the cultures of the congregations involved. This process is core to the larger process of Church reconciliation which is essential for enriching Church unity. This boundary spanning process centers around one or more congregational leaders who function representatively on behalf of their congregation in intentionally building a relationship with another congregation.

In the literature, boundary spanners are those who “establish vital linkages and binding forces between organizations.”³⁸ They are the people who “process the information coming from the partner organization, represent the interest of their own firm in the relationship, and link organizational structure to environmental elements.”³⁹ Kroeger and Bachmann describe three functions that boundary spanners have. There is an *instrumental* function which relates to how they carry out the necessary work that has them connecting with another organization. There is the *uncertainty absorption* function

³⁸ Kroeger and Bachman, “Trusting Across Boundaries,” 253.

³⁹ Perrone et al., “Free to Be Trusted?,” 423.

by which they buffer communication and circumstances to protect the relationship with the other organization. And there is the *representation* function which has the boundary spanner representatively relating back and forth between the two organizations.⁴⁰

Pastors inherently function representatively so anytime they relate to another congregation they take on the role of boundary spanner.⁴¹ Because they have the most central and recognizably formal role within a congregation, they are intuitively understood to function representatively on behalf of the congregation they lead. Other congregational members, especially those with formal leadership roles, can function as boundary spanners as well, but because of the voluntary nature of congregational membership they are less likely to consistently function in this way. Pastor Nancy sketches out the boundary spanning process and the pastor's role in it when she shared,

I think that often what pulls congregations into relationship is pastors form a relationship with another pastor and then somehow that kind of bleeds into a congregation, and then somebody comes and preaches at a different church. Right. And then there is this familiarity and I think familiarity with another organization has kind of a congregational impact.

Patty added to this picture when she stated, "I do think that the pastor still plays a really important role. And even if you don't have a formal pastor, there are leaders in your church that the community sees as fulfilling the defacto role of pastor and, and those people are the essential connectors between congregations."

⁴⁰ Kroeger and Bachman, "Trusting Across Boundaries," 254.

⁴¹ If a pastor chooses to be anonymous in a social setting they can avoid being in this role, but as soon as they are understood to be the pastor of a particular congregation they function representatively.

The boundary spanning process being proposed is a five-phase process by which inter-congregational trust develops (see figure 1). This process is roughly parallel to the four phases that Schilke and Cook propose for inter-organizational trust formation except where they picture it as a linear process, the contention here is that the development of inter-congregational trust is cyclical with the various phases building on

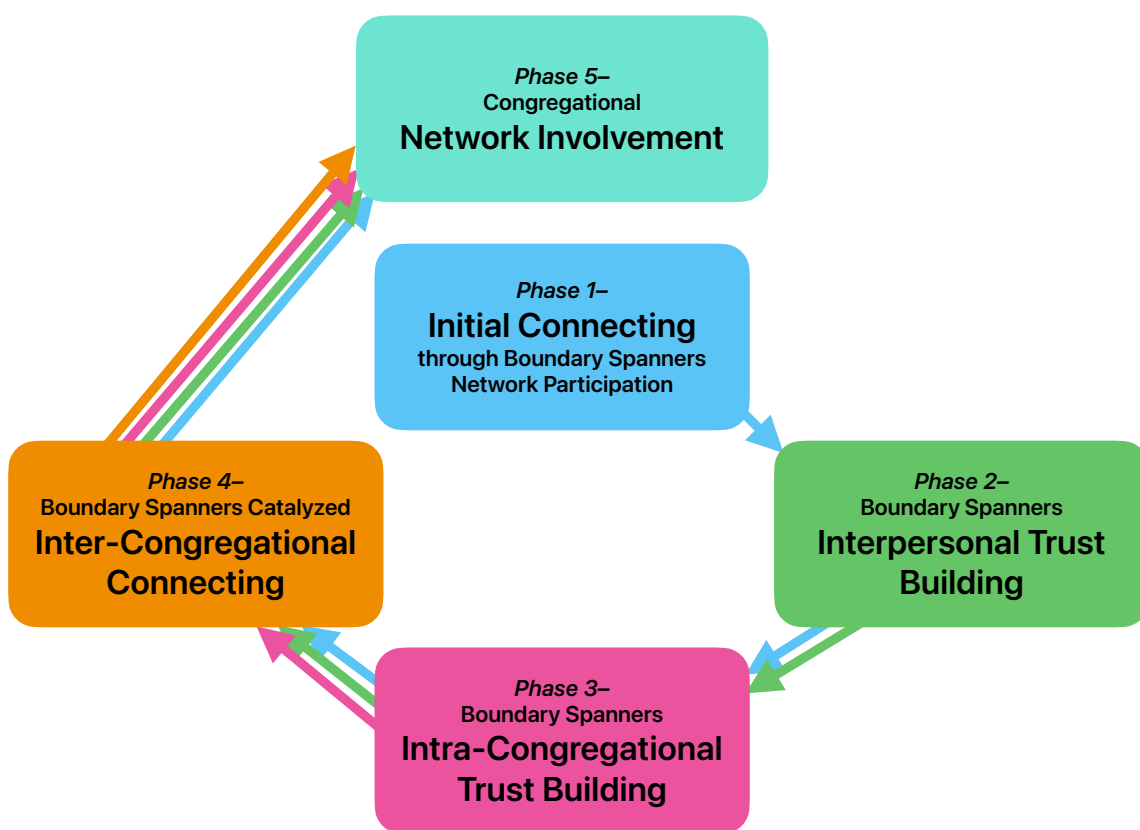


Figure 1–The Boundary Spanning Process Map

each other.⁴² There are TESP's associated with each phase of this boundary spanning process.

In the first Initial Connecting phase the leadership of one congregation becomes aware of and chooses to span a boundary by cultivating a relationship with another

⁴² Schilke and Cook, "A Cross-Level Process Theory," 286.

congregation. This primarily takes place within the various kinds of network contexts where congregational leaders first encounter each other and have on-going contact.

Such network involvement continues

throughout the boundary spanning process (symbolized by the blue arrows) providing one important context where the subsequent phases can unfold. The second

Interpersonal Trust Building phase centers around trust development between the boundary spanners from the two congregations. Anyone functioning as a boundary

spanner can initiate this phase, but the research suggests that the pastors of the

congregations must be involved in this phase at some point. This relational trust

building continues to play an important role throughout the remainder of the boundary

spanning process (symbolized by the green arrows). The third Intra-Congregational

Trust Building phase is where the boundary spanners develop trust within their own

congregation for the other congregation. This internal congregational trust building

work must continue for trust to take root at a general congregational level (symbolized

by the pink arrows). The fourth Inter-Congregational Connecting phase happens as a

broader cross-section of each congregation comes into contact with each other through

events and joint projects. The relationship between the congregations is broadened so

that a larger cross-section of each congregation's leaders enters the boundary spanning

process with each other, embedding inter-congregational trust into the relationship

between the congregations. The final Congregational Network Involvement phase is

where involvement in a network context becomes more congregationally generalized so

that the inter-congregational trust which has formed enriches the more general network

trust between multiple congregations.

Congregational life is relationally intense and transitory. The pastor and other representative leaders can and often do transition out of their roles and their capacity to relate to other congregations is limited, making the boundary spanning process dynamic and in need of regular renewal. Once trust has been embedded in the culture of a congregation, however, it becomes easier to maintain and re-engage.

Phase One: Initial Connecting

To become aware of other congregations that share a compelling ethos and to initiate relationship with them, congregations need a context in which to find each other.

Networks create the setting where the initial connection necessary for inter-congregational trust to form can happen. A church network is a group of congregations which share a common sense of mission and have structures that bring them into relationship with each other.⁴³ There are varying degrees to which networks formalize belonging and involvement, but there will always be at least a core group of congregations which identify as belonging to such networks.

A key objective in the first round of interviews was to find specific examples of how trust had developed between two congregations. Surprisingly it was found that congregational leaders tended to identify groups of congregations with which they had moderate levels of trust rather than one specific congregation with which they had deep levels of trust. There were very few examples of strong, deep, long-standing bilateral relationships and the ones that were found usually started and were sustained in the

⁴³ Holley, "Network Weaver," 17.

context of church networks.⁴⁴ This led to the conclusion that inter-congregational trust starts in the context of networks and is enhanced on the basis of on-going network involvement. Bi-lateral trust relationships tend to be episodic, ebbing and flowing in their significance. What holds them together and makes them vibrant is how they are embedded in the network context. As Pastor Thomas commented,

I feel like TrueCity is a factor that we have to name. Like there's a movement that causes us to relate to each other in a different way. Right? Like when we get together for a pastor's gathering, there's that "hey, it's nice to see everyone." We're friends, we're in ministry together, but there's also this deeper commitment of our congregations involved in that too. So, we're there for a reason. Right? Which is important.

The research suggests that bilateral congregational relationships have a symbiotic relationship with broader network trust. Congregations find each other and their relationships are nourished within a network context, and when, and to the extent that bilateral relationships develop it feeds the vitality of the network.

The relationships between congregations function differently than they do for businesses or non-profit organizations. Congregations do not by nature have relationships with other congregations the way a business might with its suppliers and buyers, and they are less inclined to develop partnerships in the way that many non-profits do. They often function in isolation and in many cases, there is a fear that if they relate too closely to other congregations, they will lose congregants. "If you share the sheep, you lose the sheep" was an *in vivo* code which became a significant research category. It came from a story Pastor Janice told of a warning she received early in her ministry work from a denominational leader. While there is a recognition that

⁴⁴ When the term "network" is used here it is not only referring to TrueCity. Denominational structures and other leadership gatherings are also in view.

interacting at some level has virtue because Church unity is a scriptural priority, this is often confined to denominational connections or pastor-centric ministerial gatherings if it happens at all.

There was a background theme of sectarian suspicion that came out in the research. As Pastor Larry shared, “So for me as a pastor in my denomination, historically, there’s been a lot of suspicion towards other Christians, a kind of sectarianism.” Pastor Oliver saw this as a general cultural challenge that congregations have inherited, “I think with where we’ve come from denominationally in the past, we are taught to fear the other, so I think that’s actually part of our Western thing.”

For congregations to come into a deeper relationship with each other which are characterized by inter-congregational trust, there first has to be a context where it feels safe and acceptable for congregations to relate more deeply. For those in Hamilton this has happened within the context of the TrueCity network. Numerous respondents talked about the importance of regular contact with leaders of other congregations as the place where the relationship between their congregations started. Pastor Gord captured this sentiment when he shared,

Like that’s one of the gifts of TrueCity is that it creates a central hub where relationships can coalesce. When you kind of gather enough churches and church members around a common table that it becomes a hub of collaboration that does a lot of good for the city in a way that just those one-off weak network relationships don’t quite do.

Pastor Oliver shared, “I always felt like that’s how it worked with a network with someone going, ‘why don’t you come and join this network?’ And then being in a room with other people almost allowed for that relationship to grow quicker than trying to seek it out individually.”

There are a number of factors that go into creating a network context where congregations can find each other and where inter-congregational trust can develop.⁴⁵

There are four subcategories which came out in the research which help further define what makes a network context viable. These are the TESP's for this phase of the boundary spanning process. They are an entry posture of trust, recognizing proximity, establishing a sense of shared mission, and relating over time.

“Go in Trusting”

One of the antecedents of trust which the literature highlights is the propensity to enter relationships with a disposition to trust.⁴⁶ This came out strongly in the research as many of those interviewed related their commitment to go into relationships trusting the other. Dory named this category when she related, “I tend to go in trusting automatically.” Pastor Frank expanded on this idea,

I think offering trust as a gift rather than trust as a reward is also critical for forming these kinds of relationships. So, when trust is purely reward, then you never quite know if you're in, whereas when trust is offered as gift, then you are welcomed in and it's up to you to do the work of building that and maintaining that with others, the mutual work.

It is one thing for individuals to function in this way, but as Pastor Quinn related, it is not only individuals who start with such a posture, “I see that there are also groups where trust is the baseline and they start with it. And I think our congregation for instances, starts with collective trust.” The trust literature indicates that the propensity to trust is not an attribute that can be developed. Individuals and groups either have this

⁴⁵ As vital as networks are for creating a context to develop inter-congregational trust, they take time, energy, and resources to start-up and develop. The system to run them functions separately from the congregational systems themselves but requires input from those systems. Pastors and other church leaders must be willing to be involved. This is a topic beyond the scope of this project.

⁴⁶ Baer and Colquitt, “Why Do People Trust,” 166–168.

posture or do not.⁴⁷ It is helpful however, recognizing the importance of this attribute, to prioritize finding individuals and groups who function in this way to build the culture of the network around.

Recognizing Proximity

To find congregations to build trust with, congregational leaders need to pay attention to proximity. First and foremost, this is about geography. Relationship requires that people's lives easily intersect with each other. As Pastor Frank related, "Well, geography and parish, number one, it was the churches that were in physical proximity to us that we had closer relationship with, particularly if they were parish churches." Alan shared a similar sentiment, "So there is just time together, there's proximity and being in each other's space so that you get to understand each other and then there's like doing stuff together." As these hint at, proximity is not simply geography but includes a commitment to interact as Pastor Quinn highlights when he shared, "so proximity of relationship. Meeting regularly, whatever that rhythm is, whether it's a once-a-month lunch, whether it's for a shorter season, weekly or biweekly" For that to be possible geography comes into the mix, but it goes beyond that to finding ways to be in regular contact with each other.

Establishing Shared Mission

For TrueCity, it was the commitment to creating a context where missional collaboration could happen that attracted initial involvement from a number of key

⁴⁷ Baer and Colquitt, "Why Do People Trust," 168.

participants. As Pastor Janice related, “so what was a draw to TrueCity was that we’re getting together with other pastors we’re talking about how to make room for mission in our churches.” Pastor Oliver shared a similar sentiment, “Where does relationship and mission intersect, so I think that’s why TrueCity was also unique to me was hey, this is more than just a support group for pastors. And that’s why I think the network thing for me seemed to work.”

The TrueCity network was launched at a time when there was broader interest in how congregations could shift to a missional ethos. While this remains a central feature of what the congregations in the network gather around, it is not as broadly compelling as it once was. This highlights the reality that networks will coalesce around different framings of mission, and that sense of mission will have to be renewed every few years to remain vibrant.

Relating Over Time

Building relationships with other congregations is never the primary focus for a congregation or its leaders. The weekly demands of preparing for Sunday worship, overseeing programing, and providing pastoral care can easily take up all the time of the pastor and other congregational leaders. Even when there is a strong commitment to inter-congregational trust building only a small percentage of a congregational leaders’ time can be given to focusing on it. So, progress on this front must come over time if it is to come at all.

As challenging as this can make trust development, it actually fits with the nature of how trust forms. The literature on collective trust development highlights how

the dimension of time is an important antecedent. Schoorman et al. are representative of this perspective when they write, “One of the issues explicit in our theory was that ‘time’ would play an important role.”⁴⁸ This perspective came out regularly in the research data. Pastor Quinn commented, “trust takes a long time to build, even when we start with it.” Pastor Janice concurred, “And so when I think about trust forming between pastors, I can think of how it worked with us was the sheer amount of time together.” Pastor Oliver unpacked this idea further, “And I’m like, oh being open, and being received, and being vulnerable, and actual history together is how we formed trust. That just takes time. But each time it’s received well, you can go a layer deeper.”

Congregational networks are the context where the initial connections that lead to inter-congregational trust are made. Persistent participation in network activities by boundary spanners over time and attention given to geographic and missional proximity are the TESP’s which are predictive of successfully establishing such initial connection. There is a symbiotic relationship between congregational networks and the bilateral relationships of congregations which are a part of them. Participation in network activities establishes and strengthens bilateral relationships and growing bilateral relationships strengthen the network.

Phase Two: Inter-personal Trust Development

How representative leaders of congregations build inter-personal trust with each other is at the heart of the boundary spanning process. For congregations to develop inter-congregational trust, it will start with a representative leader from each congregation

⁴⁸ Schoorman et al., “Past, Present, and Future,” 346.

doing the work of building relational trust with each other. This process can start with a boundary spanning relationship other than the one that involves the pastors, but at some point, the pastors will need to be involved. This makes the inter-personal trust building process between pastors particularly important. Pastor Frank articulated this well when he said, “I think pastors have a gatekeeping role in that if they extend trust to each other, it opens up the possibility for the rest of the church leaders and laity to participate in building trust.” Pastor Harold reinforced this when he shared, “I think the trust that's been built between and among pastors has been the most profound glue of the TrueCity network period.” This is not without its challenges as can be seen in how Pastor Gord describes the landscape of pastoral relationships, “the world of clergy is one of much suspicion of the other. We never quite know if other pastors are out to judge us or measure us or find us wanting or, you know, kick us to the curb or whatever, it's just that a lot of the pastors have a lot of walls up toward building relationships with other pastors.”

There are four subcategories which are the TESP's for this phase that came out in the research which are important to explore in understanding how congregational leaders and particularly pastors build inter-personal trust. First, is how the representative nature of the boundary spanner role impacts on inter-personal trust. Second, is the way openness and vulnerability play a key role in these relationships. Third, is the contours of what makes congregational boundary spanners trustworthy to each other. And last, is how theological trust develops between congregational leaders in boundary spanner roles.

Facework

There is always both an individual and collectively representative dimension to how boundary spanners relate to each other. In order for trust between congregations to develop the two boundary spanners at the heart of the relationship will simultaneously be building inter-personal trust and inter-congregational trust. Kroeger and Bachmann introduce the term *facework* to unpack the way in which this dynamic works. Facework happens when a boundary spanner invests trust in another boundary spanner on the basis of the role they are in, but where the inter-personal dimension of the relationship contributes to the way in which more trust develops. The boundary spanner is assumed to be representative of their congregation, but additional trust is built initially on the basis of the relational interaction.⁴⁹ Kroeger and Bachmann state, “The transference from interpersonal to organizational trust can occur if the potential trustor regards the behavior of the boundary-spanner as typical of their organization.”⁵⁰ Pastor Nancy articulated this reality when she shared this about the pastor of another church,

And you think, I can't imagine them not being an extension of her. Right. Like her vibe and her gentleness and her generosity and her genuine simplicity. All those things. Like, you think Okay, that has got to be part of who they have made her and who they are. Right. It is that sort of reciprocal relationship, I think that you assume.

Pastor Kurt named a variation on this same dynamic when he stated, “I think that to the degree that pastors share community and can be real with one another to that degree their churches will be likelier to collaborate as well.”

⁴⁹ Kroeger and Bachmann, “Trusting Across Boundaries,” 258.

⁵⁰ Kroeger and Bachmann, “Trusting Across Boundaries,” 258.

But as Kroeger and Bachmann highlight, for this to be effective it cannot be a robot-like performance. The boundary spanner's behavior must be perceived as genuine to who she is in order for it to build trust. They frame this in terms of intra- and extra-role behavior and state that for a highly competent boundary spanner you will be hard-pressed to tell the difference between what is truly representative and what is simply characteristic of the person themselves.⁵¹ Pastor Oliver explored this idea when he shared,

This is one thing I've wondered about trust is where is it we're doing this because there's a shared vision because of our jobs, and where could friendship step in, and you realize, oh actually I think we've built a friendship rather than just, well, we're doing this together because clearly we've been forced together to do this.

Pastor Ulysses named something similar when he shared,

I just called him up and we had a coffee and I said, you know, what can we do? How can I pray for you? What can our church do for you? You can start to care about the people as people as opposed to in a working sort of relationship. You're giving of yourself to the relationship. So much of church cooperation is about how can we work together to achieve a goal or something, but it sort of went beyond the task to the genuine relationship. But there's no magic formula for that I don't think. Except you spend time with people.

In my experience with pastors, I feel there is even more of an emphasis than what Kroeger and Bachmann describe of establishing genuine inter-personal trust prior to exploring the possibilities of inter-congregational collaboration. The inter-personal dynamics are primarily in view especially early in the relationship, but because of the representative nature of boundary spanning, the inter-congregational dynamics are always present.

⁵¹ Kroeger and Bachmann, "Trusting Across Boundaries," 260.

Openness and Vulnerability

Vulnerability is core to trust, so it is not surprising that it came up regularly as congregational leaders reflected on what creates trust for them.⁵² It is clear from what was shared that this is not easy to accomplish and most commonly happens when people are willing to share about their struggles. As Carl explained, “It takes a degree of trust to welcome other church leaders from another church to a leadership meeting to say, yeah, we're struggling. Can you pray for us?” Pastor Rita expanded on this when she shared,

I think just being able to have really good conversations, really honest conversations. And I think that's where the vulnerability comes from. Like when I hear a pastor just being very vulnerable, then I know I can also become vulnerable. It's very honest conversations where like you're not judged and you don't listen to them and judge them, but you just hear it. It's another person who's been called the same way as you have and just hearing their struggles.

Pastor Gord unpacked this further when he stated,

We just shared about how difficult and terrible things have been over the last while. And I think that actually does a lot of good for building trust because we revealed to one another that not everything is perfect or great, or rosie. I mean, that sucks the competition air out of the room and just allows us to be with, and for one another before God, allowing that vulnerability so that we can pray for one another.

What comes through clearly and consistently is that when congregational leaders can have honest conversations about challenges they are facing it creates a dynamic that grows trust at both the inter-personal and inter-congregational levels.

The converse reality also came out in the research as leaders talked about how certain behaviors undercut relational trust. Pastor Kurt captured this well when he related, “I've experienced the other thing too where pastors sit in a room and it's like a

⁵² Mayer et al., “Organizational Trust,” 712, and Rousseau et al., “Not So Different,” 395.

peeing contest. It's just who's the better pastor, whose church has God blessed the most. I've experienced as much of that as of the good stuff.”

Trustworthiness

The literature on the antecedents of inter-personal trust places a significant focus on trustworthiness, framing it as the characteristics of the trustee which make that person more likely to be trusted.⁵³ So, it is not surprising that there was a significant amount of input on the character traits that build trust with another congregational leader. There are numerous lists of characteristics used to frame the concept of trustworthiness, but the literature identifies competence, integrity, and benevolence with increasing consistency as the best summation of the antecedents of inter-personal trust.⁵⁴ The research findings bear out this trend in the literature as those interviewed embraced these three as a good and helpful summation of the character traits which cultivated deeper levels of trust.

A number of those interviewed recognized how competence, integrity, and benevolence interact with each other, framing this in terms of the layers of trustworthiness. Pastor Nancy captured this insight when she shared,

Yes, I actually think competence, integrity, and benevolence are the key factors when I think about trusting another pastor. I wonder if they're layered actually, competence is maybe the easiest trust to engage. I can know that somebody's gonna do the job I'm asking them to do, and I don't need to make a decision about whether I trust them beyond that. It's not like integrity. And then maybe integrity and benevolence are two other layers. Trusting somebody's integrity becomes very different. And then, I can trust

⁵³ Baer and Colquitt, “Why Do People Trust?” 168.

⁵⁴ Baer and Colquitt, “Why Do People Trust?” 169. They define “competence” as the ability to act effectively in a specific pursuit; “integrity” as the extent to which the trustee is perceived to hold and act on values which are acceptable to the trustor; and “benevolence” as the degree to which the trustor believes the trustee has the trustors best interest at heart.

that they have integrity, but that's not necessarily benevolence, that I feel like they have my back, like maybe that is even deeper, maybe those are kind of layers of trust.

There was a consistent recognition that all three are important, but that while competency is the first thing encountered in relationships, integrity and benevolence while slower to be perceived are more impactful, especially as it pertains to pastoring and other types of congregational leadership.

There was an interesting mixture of perspectives when it came to competence.

For some like Pastor Janice, competence plays a significant role in how trust forms,

I would say competence is a big one for me, because again, I'm not putting someone in my pulpit that I don't trust can preach. I think competence does come back a lot. Like when you get to know people and you go do they know what they're doing when they lead, are they leading thoughtfully? Are they someone who listens to the Spirit. Those are all competencies in our field. If we're going to lead this conference together do they actually have the skill to do it.

On the other hand, there was a fair bit of suspicion towards competence, recognizing that competence makes an initial positive impression, but that it is not necessarily a good indicator of overall trustworthiness. As Pastor Larry shared, "To be honest with you, over time I've taken more of a dim view of competence only because I've seen extraordinarily competent people fall into scandal and moral failure. I value competence, but not nearly as much as integrity." As important then as competency can be, it is only valuable when it comes in combination with integrity, and because this is not always the case there is hesitancy around how much stock to put in it.

Integrity was consistently recognized as the most important attribute for building trust. Pastor Mark captures what many others also articulated when he shared, "I think integrity 100% matters for building trust. 'Be perfect as your father is perfect' is an

integrity call, which I think is that the outside of the cup is in perfect coherence with the inside of the cup.” Vicky helpfully unpacked integrity when she shared,

But for me it’s about being reliable, showing up, like doing what you say you're gonna do. There are a lot of people who can share vision with passion, but then not show up, like not be real, like I think, someone's real who's vulnerable and honest and not just excited because people get excited about a lot of things, but then like they don't follow through.

Pastor Rita added, “Integrity is kinda like seeing their heart.” Pastor Larry related integrity to the way he has seen a person’s relationship with Christ come out, “I want to see that a person is gripped by Christ.”

Benevolence was also strongly attested to as an important factor in how trust develops. Pastor Ulysses framed benevolence succinctly when he commented, “what made somebody trustworthy was personal interest in me as a person.” In reflecting on a specific relationship, he went on to say, “But you got the sense he was interested in you, that he wanted you to succeed.” Pastor Sam’s reflections on benevolence builds on this further, “Now as I'm thinking about it, self-giving is core. In my experience one of the churches being willing to self-give for the sake of another has been the thing that's built trust between congregations.” Pastor Quinn added an important caveat to this discussion when he shared, “the benevolence piece is absolutely crucial, but I think that's where you have to recognize limitations, like you can't be friends with everybody.”

Perceptions of trustworthiness play a central role in how inter-personal trust develops between boundary spanners. While perceptions of competency develop quickly and effect the early stages of trust development, the more impactful characteristics of integrity and benevolence tend to develop more slowly bringing greater depth to how trust forms as they do.

Theological Trust

One characteristic of the boundary spanning process that is unique to the relationships between congregations is the important role that establishing theological trust plays in how inter-personal and inter-congregational trust forms. Theological trust is the degree to which another individual or group is embraced as fellow believers and their perspective on our shared faith is valued. It exists at the intersection of inter-personal relating and the work of exploring and articulating theological convictions. Recognizing points of theological connection is essential for theological trust to form between congregations and this starts in the relational process between boundary spanners. In this area in particular, pastors function representatively of their congregations. Pastors are the primary stewards of a congregation's theology and so what and how they communicate their theology has far reaching ramifications. Other congregational leaders can and do play a role in this area, but pastors are the lead actors.

Theological trust development is a complex process. It requires a mix of emotional intelligence and theological acumen. The research led to the identification of four aspects which combine to either strengthen or diminish such trust. The first is establishing common ground on areas considered to be essentials of the faith. The second is the ability to recognize and navigate emotionally charged trigger issues. The third is a respectful openness to theological differences with a willingness and ability to engage in healthy dialogue. The fourth is developing trusting relationships which can bridge the gap of theological differences.

Establishing Common Ground

For theological trust to form confidence must develop that there is sufficient overlap in how the essentials of the faith are framed. What came out in the research is a dialectical tension between the recognition that core essentials exist and matter on the one hand and that the definitive list of those essentials is challenging to establish on the other. It cannot be an *anything goes* context, but sectarianism, where the list of essentials is overly expanded, also must be avoided. Complicating this tension is that determining sufficient overlap is more of a relational art which involves getting to know people well enough to observe what they are passionate about and how they live that out than a science where we can use a check-list to determine who is acceptable.

Pastor Janice expressed the need to establish core essentials when she shared, “I don't want to send someone somewhere and then discover that they don't teach Jesus is Lord or that Jesus didn't rise from the dead. And if there's hesitancy about that, then I don't trust that church.” Pastor Larry expressed a similar sentiment but with a different framing, “I want to see somebody who uses the Bible and presents the Bible as an authoritative text, as one in which you hear the voice of God.”

Living in tension with this, a strong theme in the research is that there are limits to how far ranging the list of points for theological orthodoxy can and should be. Pastor Kurt named this clearly,

Except on the flip side, you can never be orthodox enough. And at some point, you're going to find points of divergence and then you have to decide how important are these points of divergence. So, orthodoxy certainly has a place in maybe building the fence around your collaboration, but orthodoxy can't be everything.

Pastor Oliver summarized this tension when he said, “we need to be tethered to something, right? Like I've often joked, just a boat with a rope in the water just drifting

probably isn't helpful. But how tightly we are tethered to something, you can be so rigid that that there's problems.”

The second challenge is that the process for establishing that there is common ground happens through relational discernment over time. It is not just about the content of their theology but how they hold it and live it out. There are formal ways of establishing common ground through using creeds and statements of faith that are helpful as a starting point, but the deeper work happens in the ebb and flow of relationships through a more iterative process where theological alignment is intuitively assessed. What those interviewed referenced more often was their observations of how people live and what they are passionate about. Carl is representative of this when he related, “if you love Jesus and you're doing your best to follow him, that's good for me.” Pastor Oliver expressed a similar sentiment when he said, “They clearly love Jesus, which is such a huge one, and while I don't agree with some of the things they hold to, I can't fault the way they're pursuing Christ.” Pastor Janice expressed it like this,

Again, I think it's realizing that we have more in common than we have different right or, oh, we do things differently, but oh, like you love Jesus too, and you want to see people find Jesus.

So, while establishing common ground has an essential orthodoxy piece to it, there are also the right affections of orthopathy and the right practices of orthopraxy which get discerned and integrated into the picture over time.

Navigating Trigger Issues

A complication to this process of assessing common ground is the existence of emotionally fraught theological *trigger* issues which feel like essentials to people but

upon reflection are recognized as secondary. For a boundary spanner to have the emotional intelligence to recognize when another leader's way of articulating their theological posture is proving triggering and be able to bracket such emotions and stay in the conversation requires significant relational maturity. Ellen named this challenge when she shared, "It's really difficult to trust people when we have profound disagreements with them about something that might be really deeply important to us." Pastor Nancy provided the clearest description of how this challenge unfolds when she observed,

We all have content that we hold more personally than other content, you know, like the role of women in the church for me. Hmm. And we don't always know what those things are. And we don't necessarily know what they are for other people. So sometimes I think when we are in these content conversations, we step on somebody's toes without realizing we were stepping on their toes, that this was a hot topic for them.

For a person to come to recognize what their theological *trigger* issues are and how to navigate them is key to establishing and developing theological trust with those who are different.

Respectful Openness to Differences

A third related aspect of theological trust is the need for humility in how beliefs are held when interacting with those who see things differently. Carl articulated this well,

Spiritual maturity is being able to openly pursue God and receive from him gifts from any stream of Christianity. You're doing it because it allows the Holy Spirit to shape us and change us. It's trusting that the Spirit has been active throughout all streams of Christianity throughout the ages and has something to teach us, rather than we have the monopoly on truth.

Pastor Ulysses added to this theme when he shared, "You've gotta be open to learning from somebody and accepting that maybe you're not a hundred percent right. That's

trickier for some people than others.” This is not a posture that our culture encourages. Too often in inter-congregational contexts a climate is not cultivated that makes it safe to respectfully engage topics where people see things differently from each other.

Relationships which Bridge the Gap

A conviction that evolved from doing this research is that in order to develop richer inter-congregational trust what is most needed is boundary spanners who will establish deep, healthy relationships across theological chasms. Pastor Frank pointed to this when he shared, “I think personal relationship is really important. Like where there's personal relationship, you can live with more theological diversity. When relationship breaks down, then theological diversity is hard to maintain.” Pastor Oliver expressed something similar when he reflected, “I think pastoring, the more you get to know someone and see their integrity, I think the more open you are to also work across theological challenges.” Pastor Janice’s observations based on her involvement in the TrueCity network add to these insights,

And I think one of the reasons TrueCity has been able to keep going, even with theological differences is because the relationships started first. And so, then we could say, wow, this person thinks totally different than me on this issue theologically, but then you see who they are and you see their heart and you would actually have their back.

This highlights clearly why relationships which are rich in trust between congregational boundary spanners are vital to the formation of inter-congregational trust and the overall process of Church reconciliation.

The second phase of the boundary spanning process requires those functioning representatively on behalf of their congregations to develop inter-personal trust with

each other. When they do, they create conditions under which inter-congregational trust can grow and flourish. The research indicates that dual level *facework* interactions most fruitfully lead to TESP's when boundary spanners are open and vulnerable with each other, being willing to share authentically the challenges as well as the successes that they are encountering. Further, trust develops most readily when boundary spanners come to be known for the competence, benevolence, and particularly the integrity which characterizes trustworthiness. The establishment and deepening of theological trust is crucial in these relationships where others are embraced as brothers and sisters in Christ and where there is an openness to learning from them. Such work requires a combination of emotional intelligence and theological dialogue skills. It starts with the recognition of basic common ground usually as the result of a shared commitment to a creed or statement of faith but deepens when there is enough trust established to respectfully explore more challenging issues where differences exist.

Phase 3: Intra-Congregational Trust Building

How boundary spanners go about cultivating trust within their own congregation for other boundary spanners and the congregations that they represent is the third Intra-Congregational phase of the boundary spanning process. As crucial as it is for boundary spanners to develop inter-personal trust with each other, if they do not find ways to bring the congregations they represent along with them on this trust development journey, inter-congregational trust will remain shallow and ill-defined if it develops at all.

From the viewpoint of the organizational trust literature there is an assumption that once boundary spanners establish connection with each other their organizations will start to interact. The expectation is that boundary spanners will establish active inter-organizational partnerships.⁵⁵ Congregations do not function in the same way. Boundary spanners in a congregational context must find ways to alert their congregation to the potential of relationship with another congregation and communicate why this would be beneficial in order for active interaction to begin. If the boundary spanner enjoys strong trust within their congregational setting, then the process will benefit from the second-hand trust dynamics where there is an inclination to trust those who are trusted by those we trust.⁵⁶ But congregational boundary spanners must find ways to signal that they trust another congregation in order for their congregation to begin to develop trust for them as well.

There are five subcategories that came out in the research which are the TESP's by which boundary spanners build trust within their congregations for other congregations. First by publicly praying for those congregations. Second by communicating how they are learning from a congregation. Third by encouraging other leaders in the congregation who are potential boundary spanners to develop relationships with those in the other congregation. Fourth by sharing their pulpit with the pastor of the other congregation. And fifth by how they deal with transfers and those searching for a congregation. All these ways of building trust with another congregation require pastoral involvement. In most cases it is the pastors who are functioning as the

⁵⁵ Schilke and Cook, "A Cross-Level Process Theory," 288–289.

⁵⁶ McEvily et al., "Network Trust," 185–190.

primary boundary spanners, but even when they are not the primary ones, their participation is necessary for intra-congregational trust to develop.

Publicly Praying

Praying for other churches as part of the pastoral prayer during a weekly worship service was referenced repeatedly as a way of communicating the connection to another congregation. Pastor Bob highlighted the importance of this when he shared,

I think praying for other churches, recognizing their contribution to the body of Christ is important. If you pray for other churches, according to how they are contributing to God's mission, you realize we're not the end all be all. We're not the only people that God has here. That's something good.

Pastor Larry expressed it like this, “praying for other churches from the pulpit to give people a sense, Hey, you know what, we're in this with others.” Pastor Harold also explained the importance of this practice,

on a Sunday morning, in my pastoral prayer, I would pray for another TrueCity church often. And that they had a sense that we're in this together that probably did it more than anything else because the pastor was praying for this pastor and that congregation and we're collaborating with them and whatever ministry he mentioned.

Communicating Learning

A second important practice which was named by a number of those interviewed was the need to learn from other congregations and communicate that learning to the congregation. Pastor Larry articulates this clearly, “I think it has a lot to do with me as the leader building trust and talking about people publicly and promoting them and saying, you know, we have a lot to learn from Baptists and this is not an area where we need to be suspicious of people or excluding people.” Pastor Quinn shared how this was

part of their strategy for developing more connection, “It was signaling to the congregants who connected, Yeah. This is what we can learn from those groups.” Pastor Harold related a story of the impact that learning had on his congregation,

So we asked [this other church] to send us people to do a workshop. And they did. Now that effected very few people in the congregation, but it had a very significant impact because for the first time another congregation had helped us. And that was a tiny little event that had a significant emotional impact for building trust for an outside congregation.

Recognizing and Equipping Other Boundary Spanners

A third important practice that came out in the research is to recognize others who have the potential to function as boundary spanners and to broker relationships for them with people in other congregations. Ellen related how her pastor worked to do this for her and others, “Our pastor brought a sense of leadership by encouraging a group of us to participate in the network. And when somebody is able to have a dual role of being a person who's really interested in the network and also has a role of responsibility and leadership within their own church community that's efficacious.” Pastor Janice talked about this same thrust from the perspective of the pastor,

So it wasn't enough for me to be on board with TrueCity. We also had to have the board. Right? And we had a couple key leaders that were always very passionate about TrueCity. We knew that if we had a TrueCity event, that there were these people saying, I care about that too. That matters to me. And that, you know, passes on that ethos.

Pastor Bob related a situation where he brokered relationship with another congregation,

Their church was doing these worship nights out in the park. They would have musicians come and wanted musicians to come from other churches. It was really easy for me to tell her, Hey, I've got a bunch of musicians and, you know, recommended musicians. There were people from our church that went over and joined their teams. I think that conveys a kind of trust as well to say like, nothing crazy is going to happen over there. You're fine.

Pastor Oliver described the need for this practice well when he shared,

And definitely those people beyond the pastor, I think the pastor can feel like the entry point but can easily become the bottleneck to most things, right. So like every congregation I think has key influencers in it, don't they? And so I think that piece of, yeah, the building trust within your congregation for another congregation and then just highlighting those places for connection. Like they're the representative of that. But I think it does require all of those pieces I think to work well.

Sharing Pulpits

A fourth impactful practice that came up often in the research was allowing the pastor of a congregation one is in relationship with to come and fill the pulpit of one's church.

Pastor Quinn highlighted this when he shared, “anytime you bring someone else from another congregation like a pastor to speak or present or to share in your congregation, I think that builds a level of trust because there's direct communication.” Pastor Bob pointed to this as well, “And then like you get all the way to the point of like a pulpit swap or something. That's a meaningful indicator” And Pastor Harold related the impact this practice had in his experience,

A mark that one congregation trusts another is when they let that congregation's pastor preach in their church. That's a rare thing. When TrueCity dabbled in that it was incredible. Incredible. Yeah. And so when I had one of the other pastors preach there that was high impact and built trust.

Blessing Transfers

One other intra-congregational trust practice that impactfully builds trust between congregations is an open-handed posture towards which congregation people end up committed to be a part of. This might take the form of when new people come to a

church in search of a congregation that is a good fit for them. Pastor Gord described this when he shared,

One of the practices that I've heard most in the TrueCity network has been when pastors know a fellow church well enough to recommend to new people that walk in their doors to say, oh, if our church isn't a fit for you, like, there's this really great other church down the road that I think would be a good fit for you. Can I help connect you with that pastor? So that's one of the best indications of trust, that willingness to let go with an open hand, and entrust people to other churches.

It can also take the even more challenging form of blessing the transfer of people who have been part of one's congregation who decide to switch to another church.

Pastor Bob described this scenario when he shared,

one of the things I noticed here, somebody from our church might say, you know, I think the Lord is leading us over to this other church. And there's been lots of times where leadership here has said, well, why don't we bless you as you go? And we pray that you'll be as much of a blessing there as you were here and take our blessing with you. That's great. And that's because I think partly the leadership here knows and trusts the leadership there and can say this is a good place for them to be. We trust that we aren't the only church in Hamilton. We can allow God to move people around.

Only a limited number of people within a congregation will have deep direct relationships with the members of a specific other congregation. Most inter-congregational trust develops second hand as trusted boundary spanners find ways to build the trust of their own congregation towards another congregation. These five TESP's of praying for, communicating what has been learned from, connecting other boundary spanners to, opening up the pulpit to the pastor of, and blessing transfers to another congregation are powerful ways to build the inter-congregational trust with that congregation.

Phase 4: Direct Inter-Congregational Trust Building

The fourth phase in the inter-congregational trust building process is when congregations can be brought into direct contact with each other, facilitating the opportunity to multiply the relationships between the congregations. Such opportunities either take the form of worship and prayer events where a broader group of people from the different congregations come into contact with each other for a few hours, or collaborative forms of missional engagement where a few members of different congregations connect to learn or serve together. When asked how trust forms between congregations the mantra of pray together, worship together, serve together came up often from those interviewed making these three TESP's the primary sub-categories for this phase.

Worshipping Together

Pastor Ulysses identified a couple of the elements that make collective worship so powerful in building inter-congregational trust when he shared,

I really do think worshipping together is what formed trust for a couple of reasons. One is, you know, because it focused you on Jesus, but then also you actually see people worship in a different way. You know, as you get to know those people, you say, well, they're kind of all right, even if they're different, you know it knits your hearts together.

Speaking from her experience with other congregations in her neighbourhood, Patty provided a helpful case study when she shared,

I feel like what has built that trust between our congregations is when we've had the opportunity to have communal worship services together. And I think that that builds trust because it's like, oh yeah, we are the Church and we're worshipping the same God. And that is really grounding and foundational and trust building.

Pastor Gord highlighted another example of the power of collective worship for building inter-congregational trust when he shared,

So, the fact that that kind of trust has been built at that level through experiences of shared mutual worship has blossomed into a traveling band of minstrels that visit other churches. So, I've built the relationship of trust, I have passed that on and connected one of our church members, who then, you know, has brought more folks from TrueCity into our spaces from other TrueCity churches.

Praying Together

In a similar and connected way, when congregations have the opportunity to pray together it catalyzes inter-congregational trust. Pastor Frank related the impact that praying together had on the churches in his community,

the fact that we prayed with other people was helpful. In our sunrise service, when we'd have up to seven churches, we would always end in prayer circles with people from other churches. And just that little annual practice was valuable for reminding us that we're together in this bigger picture.

Pastor Harold shared how the annual TrueCity prayer room had an impact on the congregation he pastors,

I was amazed at how many people participated in the two weeks of prayer around the conference that GOHOP did. Doing this prayer every year had an impact, a sense of trust was built over that. Cause they're crazy charismatics or, they're crazy CRC folk, but after we pray together, they're not crazy anymore. So, I think praying together has a huge impact.

In a similar way, Patty related how people praying together impacts their posture towards each other's congregations, "I think one thing that happens when you have those relationships on the person-to-person level through praying together is you're less likely to trash talk that community for their stance on X, Y, or Z, you would be slow to dismiss them."

Doing Mission Together

As important as shared worship and prayer have been for developing inter-congregational trust, it is doing mission together that has been most impactful for those involved in the TrueCity network and that came out clearly in the interviews. As Pastor Thomas put it,

I think mission is it for me, like, I think that's where trust forms for me, cuz Yeah. It can be such a futile exercise to try to agree on worship style or even like to build trust in that area. But yeah, I just, I kind of wonder if mission can become a kind of like a baseline foundational thing for people, they're willing to allow others into their lives in a different kinda way. Right?

Pastor Gord described the impact that he saw shared involvement in mission have on those in his congregation,

But then as our people actually work it out on the ground and find people of similar heart and mind who are also interested in refugees, for instance, or who are also interested in doing something about homelessness or in getting engaged with a local school or whatever the case may be, they find that the formal thing that happened, actually that's true to their experience and their lived reality that these are people that they can partner with.

Carl described a similar dynamic that he has seen taking place in the congregation he is a part of,

You know, supporting local ministries, like Helping Hands, I think that goes a long way to develop trust because working alongside people makes opportunities for conversation, just to get to know one another better. I think it's those opportunities where you see, oh, both congregations are passionate about this. So, I think that that's really helpful the time journeying together and working together because when you see people's hearts and it becomes a person and not just an ideology or a theology, then it's strengthens the relationship.

Pastor Bob pointed to the power of shared mission to overcome differences when he shared, “You can probably say that church over there has a very different view from ours on baptism or women in ministry or gender or whatever. And yet, if we're both

working on the same thing, we can tolerate those differences.” And Pastor Frank shared an example of when he saw this lived out in his context,

what held us together for a long time is that we had a common commitment to First Nations people. And we also had people in both churches that worked together and their close relationship, even when my relationship with the pastor was strained, we had overlapping people in that mission, we had overlapping care for people. And so that was a big part of what held us together in those times of tension.

The more people within a congregation who have had direct trust building interactions with the members of another congregation, the deeper the inter-congregational trust will take root in the culture of the congregation. That is what makes the TESP's for this phase of worshipping together, praying together, and engaging mission together particularly important. When the trust between congregations is limited to the inter-personal trust experienced by one or two boundary spanners it can more easily diminish or be broken, but when it becomes the experience of a broader group of people it is more deeply embedded in the life of the congregation. This is what makes phase 4 of the process particularly powerful as it generalizes the inter-congregational trust more fully.

Phase 5: Congregational Network Involvement

This final phase brings us back to the role that congregational networks play in catalyzing inter-congregational trust. The difference between phase 1 and phase 5 is that the involvement in the network has broadened from the participation of an individual boundary spanner to congregational involvement. Congregations developing bi-lateral relationships with each other happens simultaneously and symbiotically with their involvement in a congregational network like TrueCity. So, this phase can and does

happen throughout the larger boundary spanning process, and the practices which characterize this phase run parallel to those which happen in the other phases.

Unlike the inter-organizational trust established in the more active partnerships that characterize businesses and non-profits where the two organizations involved have regular interactions between multiple people, congregational life rarely necessitates interaction with other congregations and even when it does it is usually limited in time and scope. For inter-congregational trust to be sustained over time, congregations need a network context where they are pulled into regular interaction with multiple other congregations. This can be and often is a local denominational structure, but for Church unity in a local context to be as full orb'd as God intends, it is important to pursue relationships which stretch beyond our denominational affiliations.

To engage this phase, the boundary spanners in a congregation must find ways to build the congregation's awareness of their broader involvement in the network and encourage participation in network events and collaborative projects which will enrich the congregation and have the added benefit of developing deeper inter-personal trust between a growing number of boundary spanners.

As congregations begin to understand themselves as part of a broader network and participate together with other congregations in that network it deepens the trust for the other congregations that are a part of the network. Pastor Mark described the importance of this for his congregation,

And then if we're gonna be a church that has any hope of bringing these streams together, we're gonna have to be friends with the expressions of these streams and so connecting them with TrueCity became kind of the physical representation of that. And just the fact that congregations associated with other congregations as part of the same movement meant that there was a sense of church congregational connection.

And Pastor Gord shared how his congregation led him to develop broader inter-congregational relationships because of their involvement in the network before he arrived,

I'm kind of a second-generation pastor to TrueCity. I wasn't the pastor who was here when the relationship with TrueCity was established. So, I entered into this relational network that already existed. It's kind of a falling backwards into the goodness that's been built and that's ours. And so it's been members of my church that have kind of schooled me in the ways of TrueCity and the relationships that are there. So, because there's this kind of formal church to church relationships, but also all these interconnected relationships, I think that has provided enough strength between the congregations to actually disciple the pastors into the way of relating between churches.

There are two network TESP's which came out in the research which supplement the development of inter-congregational trust. The first is organizing collaborative events and projects and the second is developing a process for formalizing partnership in the network.

Collaborative Events and Projects

If there is enough organizational capacity within the network of congregations to coordinate events and projects, these multi-church collaborative contexts have a bigger draw and more resources to offer to the congregations that are involved. Pastor Nancy described the impact of a network of churches doing shared activities together,

I think about things like the Ride for Refuge, you know, I had lots of relationships with other churches as a result of people having some similar forward-facing activity together, I think that is how congregations get to know other congregations.

Pastor Oliver related how having opportunities to get congregants involved in network activities built broader relationships,

And I could say, hey, there's actually this meeting with other congregations who are also thinking through this. Could we come and be part of that? I think the conference was another one to invite people and say, yeah, Oliver told us about this TrueCity thing, so what does it look like in reality to come and be part of something bigger than ourselves? And then those people were building relationship beyond just Oliver having to facilitate relationship, like relationships got built outside of that.

The TrueCity Conference came out repeatedly as of particular value for connecting congregations to the network and to the other congregations which make it up.⁵⁷ Pastor Bob pointed to this reality when he shared, “I mean, everybody says about the TrueCity conference, a big highlight is just like being in a room with people from other churches and praying and worshiping and hearing a story about something God did, that's cool. There's something really transcendent about that.”

The challenge in running events and facilitating collaborative projects is to have them focus on congregational realities in a way that strengthens the congregations involved rather than having it focus on the network in a way that is distinct from those congregations. This has been a consistent challenge over the years of running the conference and developing other collaborative projects.

Formalizing Partnership

Leadership transitions, and particularly pastoral transitions, create challenges for sustaining the development of inter-congregational trust. By creating a partnership process that formalized the relationship between the congregations which were committed to being involved, the TrueCity network embedded the connection in the

⁵⁷ The TrueCity Conference is an annual event which the network of churches in Hamilton organizes and run together each February. The goal of the conference is to create space to worship and pray together, to share stories of what God is doing in the city, and to learn from each other how congregations are engaging mission.

culture of those congregations at a level that is deeper than the pastor's personal relationships. Pastor Ingrid pointed to this when she shared, "it seems to me that TrueCity churches have a closer relationship and tend towards trust more often than perhaps totally unrelated churches who just don't know about each other at all." Pastor Gord articulated the benefits of this most clearly when he shared,

I think very simply the difference is the formality, having something like the TrueCity network gives a formality and a legitimacy, almost a credentialing to the relationship. Being part of same thing, like in TrueCity gives a common gathering point. It may be that we just never run into some of these other churches because we're not gathered around the same table. When we do gather around the same table, then it gives an opportunity for my relationships to become my church's relationships and my congregation members relationships, because we're working around a common table or common activities or issues.

Conclusion

The first part of this chapter explored critical realist grounded theory and how it was used to analyze the data coming from the research done for this project. This resulted in a five-phase boundary spanning process theory which maps out how inter-congregational trust is established and deepened. The phenomenon of inter-congregational trust is where one congregation commits to another congregation in such a way that it makes itself vulnerable based on the expectation of mutual benefit. This is a form of inter-organizational trust. The bulk of the chapter is devoted to laying out the research evidence for each of the five-phases in the boundary spanning process and the various TESP's which animate each of these phases.

Having laid out how inter-congregational trust develops through the boundary spanning process; in the next chapter the case will be made for how this work is central

to the pursuit of Church unity in each local context where there are multiple congregations. Developing inter-congregational trust is one important way that Church reconciliation is tangibly lived out giving glory to God and witnessing to the world.

CHAPTER 4: CHURCH RECONCILIATION—A FREE CHURCH PRACTICAL ECCLESIOLOGY OF LOCAL UNITY

This project is a work of practical ecclesiology with a focus on city Church unity from a Free Church perspective. It is a practice-led initiative which aims to distill theological insights from work done with a network of congregations in Hamilton, ON. It argues that congregations play a crucial role in how God deepens and enriches Church unity and that the relational spaces between congregations are crucial loci where this happens through the development of inter-congregational trust. This is at the heart of the process of Church reconciliation. Prioritizing practices which enrich the trust between congregations in a city context is a highly significant way of participating in this process.

In the introduction the foundation for a theology of Church reconciliation was laid out. The priority Church unity is given in the New Testament was highlighted; how Church unity is understood to be in process was explored; the differentiated nature of the unity God intends was unpacked; and God's call to join with him in his reconciling work was considered. A key frontier of that call to reconciliation is how it gets worked out within the Church. God's intention for the Church is to continually pursue a unity which mirrors the unity within the Trinity. Church reconciliation is the process that moves the Church from the unity it has now towards the fullness of unity that God intends for it and will ultimately bring it to in the new creation.

In chapter 3, through using a critical realist grounded theory methodology, a theory was laid out of how by prioritizing practices which embed trust in congregational cultures, congregations participate in a five-phase boundary spanning process by which inter-congregational trust develops. When congregations cultivate such inter-congregational trust, they live into the calling to pursue Church reconciliation. Understanding this boundary spanning process equips congregations to better join with the Spirit's work of pursuing Church reconciliation in specific locales.

At the start of this chapter the case is made that sociologically congregations are the primary structural reality of the Church and are central for how life in Christ gets lived out.¹ There are other types of organizational structures that Christians participate in as part of the life of faith, but congregations are the most prevalent and important for how the Church exists in a specific locale, and so the role they have in how unity gets lived out within the ecclesial ecology of that place is crucial.² Next, the implications of the reality that in the vast majority of contexts there are multiple congregations and so the Church in a city or region is characterized in significant ways by the relationships between these congregations. Since congregations are diverse in multiple ways, engaging well with each other so that unity characterizes these relationships is complex and challenging to navigate. This leads to the exploration of how the attribute of catholicity, which has been central to the self-understanding of the Church since the second century, makes the case that diversity is to be normative and so it is a strength to

¹ The term "congregation" is self-consciously used, privileging a Free Church ecclesiological perspective. In using this term, the intention is not to ignore the reality of parishes and other less formal Christian communities but rather to frame them as congregations because of the Free Church lens through which their existence is being interpreted.

² Benac, *Adaptive Church*, 8. This term will be used inter-changeably with the term city Church.

be valued more than a problem to be solved. The chapter will end with an exploration of how theological trust is established and deepened and why establishing such trust is necessary to strengthen the relationship between diverse congregations. Inter-congregational trust is a key part of the lived experience of Church unity. Such trust is theologically significant as it directly connects congregations and the believers who make them up to the Spirit's work to bring about the reality Jesus prayed for in Gethsemane as he looked towards the cross.

Practical Ecclesiology Revisited

In *Disclosing Church*, Clare Watkins highlights how the beautiful duality of divine indwelling and human activity which have always characterized congregations make for a richly integrated, multi-layered reality. In our late modern, Western cultural context, however, with its tendency to sharply distinguish between the immanent and transcendent, this creates a context rife for dichotomizing. She helpfully brings into focus how Practical Ecclesiology can inadvertently reinforce this dichotomizing tendency by using a correlational approach to bring the critical insights of qualitative methodologies into conversation with theological postulations about what should be normative for congregations.³ She states, "What we need to find is a way of speaking of the actual Church, which holds that earthly-heavenly tension in faithful continuity with the longer tradition and in ways authentic to the epistemological assumptions of our own time."⁴ The critical realist grounded theory methodology which is being used for this project takes a step in this direction. By equipping us to recognize how we are

³ Watkins, *Disclosing Church*, 6–7.

⁴ Watkins, *Disclosing Church*, 7.

epistemologically limited in our ability to grasp ontological reality, it lays out the terms upon which we can still explore ontology, through a methodological commitment to openness and humility.

The existence of a normative reality can be theologically explored without there needing to be a claim that it is fully grasped. By recognizing that there are epistemological limitations, the implications of one's theology can be worked out in theory and brought into dialogue with the results of critical, qualitative methodologies. And then in on-going dialogue, these theological postulations can be iteratively and abductively revised moving toward a better, fuller grasp of normative reality. Through using critical realism's postulation of the layered nature of reality, observations can be made at the empirical level, recognizing processes at work at the actual level, and postulating theological truth at the real level.

A start was made on this in the last chapter by observing trust embedding social practices (TESPs) at the empirical level and recognizing how at the real level these were part of a process of boundary spanning which formed inter-congregational trust. The aim of this chapter is to work out the theological implications of this by exploring the process of Church reconciliation at the actual level and what it shows us of the Spirit's work to deepen unity at the real level. This framing makes the case for the practice-led grounded theory that there is a five-phase boundary spanning process by which inter-congregational trust is enriched. This inter-congregational trust development is core to the Church reconciliation process and an important dimension of the lived experience of Church unity. It make it possible to contribute theological postulations about what should be normative TESPs for pastors and congregations by grounding them in the

analysis of qualitative research findings while recognizing that this contribution is not the final word on the subject.

This work flows out of a Free Church formed theology. My theological formation in this stream of the Church leads me naturally to pay particular attention to congregations and the role they play in the broader sense of Church in a city context. This is not, however, a work of dogmatic Free Church ecclesiology which argues that only those who see congregations as central have something to contribute. Rather it is an ecclesiology-from-below which recognizes the culturally situated reality of all ecclesiology; takes seriously the historically situated origins and development of the empirical church; and seeks to avoid a theological reductionism that simply embeds presuppositions into the research.⁵ It was because my theological presuppositions led me to view congregations as central that my work tapped into the sociological reality of the congregationalization of the Church which I have seen at play through my twenty years of work developing the TrueCity network.⁶ This trend of congregationalization arises, first of all due to the reality that churches with a polity shaped by a Free Church ecclesiology are the fastest growing sector of the Church globally. And secondly, due to the example of broader membership involvement which the Free Church stream has demonstrated, churches in other ecclesiological streams have been pushed to give a greater voice to the laity within their structures.⁷ This trend meant that my formation within the Free Church stream equipped me well to approach all churches whatever

⁵ Ecclesiology-from-below is Roger Haight's term which he uses to highlight the contrast with the from-above dogmatic ecclesiologies which tend to be ahistorical, focused exclusively on one tradition, and whose development over time is understood to be God initiated. Haight, *Historical Ecclesiology*, 56–65.

⁶ Volf, *Likeness*, 12.

⁷ Ammerman, "Denominationalism/Congregationalism," 355–361.

their polity as congregations. It gave me eyes to see the central role that congregationalization had in the life of the city Church giving my work validity and purpose.

The Primacy of Congregational Reality in the Pursuit of Church Unity

Given the central role that congregations play in the life of the Church, they need to be taken into account in the pursuit of Church reconciliation. The importance of congregations has not been adequately recognized or integrated into how practically the work to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace (Eph 4:3) gets done. While there are other historically significant ecclesiological formulations which provide important alternative input on how unity forms, they do not sufficiently engage churches as congregations in the process. By pointing us to the crucial role which congregations play in the life of the broader Church, a more inclusively framed Free Church ecclesiology can both create the theological room and lead to a practical process which enriches broader unity. If the unity of the Church is valued and there is a commitment to engaging that pursuit locally, it creates the theological conditions under which the local expressions of all traditions can be brought into relationship with each other.

This section starts with a summation of the key characteristics of Free Church ecclesiology and an inclusivist framing of the centrality of congregations in the make-up of the Church is laid out. Then the important role that congregational structures play in the pursuit of unity and why it is crucial to have the most basic Church structure, that of the congregation, involved in this process is considered.

An Inclusivist Free Church Ecclesiology of Congregations

Free Church ecclesiology originated with the theological work of the Radical Reformers of the Anabaptist tradition. They believed that the Protestant Reformers had not gone far enough in dissociating the Church from an official relationship with the State and dismantling the hierarchy which characterize the oversight from ecclesiastical authorities. They held that each church should be understood as a distinct congregation made up of people who have had a personal conversion experience and showed evidence of a relationship with God. They framed the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers as a way of expressing their commitment to the full involvement of the whole congregation in how each congregation functioned.⁸ In most cases churches within this tradition have a congregational polity which makes church leadership accountable to the congregation itself.

Free Church ecclesiology holds that the essential reality of the Church is lived out first and foremost in the millions of local assemblies scattered throughout the world where groups of believers meet in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ for the purpose of glorifying God, loving each other, and participating in the coming of God's kingdom to the places where they dwell. There is significant theological debate about what makes any local assembly a true church and on what basis each such church relates to the broader whole of the Church. For those working from a Free Church ecclesiology, each such congregation is in direct relationship with Christ by the work of the Spirit. Jesus' words in Matthew 18:20, "For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with

⁸ Van Gelder, *Essence*, 59.

them.” has been the theological touchstone for such a Free Church ecclesiological perspective from the origins of this ecclesiological tradition.⁹

This tradition has the theological space necessary for all assemblies from all traditions which are committed to the Lord Jesus Christ and who understand themselves to be churches, to be recognized as true churches. Volf compellingly frames this when he contends, “Wherever the Spirit of Christ, which as the eschatological gift anticipates God’s new creation in history is present in its *ecclesially constitutive* activity, there is the church. The Spirit unites the gathered congregation with the triune God and integrates it into a history extending from Christ to the eschatological new creation.”¹⁰ A congregation is not a true church based on its relationships to other congregations or to some currently existing larger structure, but because the Spirit connects each congregation directly to the eschatological fullness of the Church. Because it is the same Spirit which constitutes each congregation as a true church, all such congregations are in relationship with each other.

From a Free Church perspective, it is in the collective context of the congregation that the reality of the Christian life gets primarily lived out. While there is a vital, important individual dimension to the Christian life, it cannot be fully lived out apart from involvement in some form of congregational reality. Participation in such congregations is the irreducible minimum of faithful Christian living. It is here in the

⁹ Volf, *Likeness*, 135–136. Volf lays out how this verse has influenced ecclesiological formulations throughout the history of the Church from Ignatius to Tertullian to Smyth. He quotes Jenkins, *Congregationalism*, in claiming that it has “shaped the entire Free Church tradition.” He then proceeds to make it the central passage in the Free Church ecclesiology that he lays out.

¹⁰ Volf, *Likeness*, 129, italics in the original.

relationships between individuals in a congregation that the most basic form of unity becomes a reality.

A key contention of Free Church ecclesiology is that each congregation is directly in relationship with Christ and is ultimately answerable only to him. This position has traditionally been framed as the autonomy of the local church, and it leads to a prescribed polity that makes each congregation responsible for its own existence. A dogmatic Free Church perspective holds that only those congregations that understand themselves to be autonomous and are structured accordingly are in fact true churches. It is this kind of exclusivist framing which has created the sectarian posture which Free Churches are too often known for. Such an over-against posture frames ecclesiality too narrowly and in rejecting the legitimacy of all other Christian expressions on the basis of their polity, works at cross purposes with the strong scriptural call to unity.

Such an exclusivist framing is not necessary to hold to a Free Church perspective, and many believers who are part of Free Church congregations would not view it in this way. An alternative inclusivist perspective is possible. This position holds that there are churches in every context from across the vast array of traditions which have the Spirit of Christ at work forming them into congregations. Such an inclusivist Free Church ecclesiological position believes that all churches across traditions are legitimately churches based solely on their commitment to Christ and the work of the Spirit in their midst, even if they do not understand themselves to be congregations in this way. Those who hold to such inclusivist conviction do not believe that the way churches from other traditions understand themselves nor how they function needs to change in order to recognize them as true churches. This inclusivist Free Church

framing provides a basis upon which all churches in a local context, understood to each be a congregation, can relate to each other.

Such an inclusivist Free Church position thinks less in terms of autonomy and more in terms of primacy. Each congregation is in relationship with all the other congregations and a variety of other structures through the work of the Spirit and so thinking in terms of autonomy is a misnomer. Because it is each congregation's direct relationship with the risen Christ through the work of the Spirit which constitutes it as a church, it is this congregational reality that is ecclesologically primary. Within the ecclesial ecology of any given locale, congregations are also sociologically primary because they are the most pervasive and commonly experienced Church structure. So, while an inclusivist perspective recognizes the significance of other structures and the inter-dependence between all the different iterations of Church in a local context, it understands congregations to be primary.

In summary, Free Church ecclesiology understands the congregation to be central to ecclesial reality. It is the Spirit's ecclesial constituting work which makes each assembly gathered in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ into a true church. An inclusivist Free Church posture views churches from all traditions as congregations directly in relationship with Christ and in relationship with each other because of the Spirit's work they have in common with each other. While the call to Church unity has a primary intra-congregational horizon, it has an important secondary inter-congregational horizon which it is called to engage through the process of Church reconciliation. This inter-congregational horizon is important for the health of each

congregation and has a significant impact on the spiritual climate of the local context which congregations share with each other.

The Significance of Congregational Structures

A congregation is more than simply a group of individuals, there is a structural reality to its existence. These structures play a significant role in the life of each congregation and the way congregations relate to each other. This is not adequately recognized nor accounted for. A congregational structure is formalized, to a greater or lesser extent, in ways consistent with the culture it exists in and the tradition it is a part of. Such structures shape how leaders are chosen and how what is expected of them gets laid out; what the stated beliefs are and how they get modified; when congregational gatherings happen and for what purpose; how membership is framed and how it functions; how funds are gathered and allocated; and what the congregation's relationship to temporal authorities are.

While congregational structures are run and modified by those who are part of the congregation, they also shape the behaviors and beliefs of those same people. Such structures not only shape the way congregations function but are also a part of each congregational expression. They have an integral role in both defining and shaping the culture of the congregation.

The posture that a congregation has towards other congregations and the importance given to the pursuit of Church reconciliation is significantly shaped by its structures. This is often happening implicitly, unexamined in the background. One of the challenges for congregations is that too often their structures lead them to function

from a congregation-centric posture that can warp into a congregation-exclusive attitude. When allowed to develop, such an attitude makes the best interest of the congregation the ultimate goal rather than the Kingdom of God, damaging the life of the congregation and all who are a part of it and relate to it in the process.

Living into the call to broader Church unity through pursuing Church reconciliation is an important antidote to help congregations avoid this pitfall. Since congregations have such a central role in the life of the ecclesial ecology of each local context, in order to deepen unity congregations need to be active participants in the process. It is important for congregations to assess the posture their structures dictate and whether they encourage or impede participation in the process of Church reconciliation.

Each congregation has a structure which plays an important role in how the congregation lives out its calling. To pursue Church reconciliation the structure of the congregation must prioritize Church unity. This is a crucial way in which the congregation submits to God by pursuing the Kingdom first and foremost.

Involving Congregational Structures in Church Reconciliation

Since congregations are the most fundamental and pervasive structures within the Church, any initiative that aims to enrich Church unity does well to take congregations into account. The ecclesial ecology of any city is multifaceted and involves a complex set of structural entities which are to some degree in relationship with each other.¹¹ All these connections have a part to play in the deepening of Church unity. All too often,

¹¹ In Hamilton beyond congregations such structural entities include McMaster Divinity College, numerous Christian non-profit organizations, and denominational structures of various kinds.

however, when non-congregational entities within the broader Church take initiative to strengthen unity, they seek to facilitate the relational connection of individuals from various congregations but bypass the structural reality of those congregations. In so doing they miss the opportunity to embed unity more deeply into the culture of congregations, leaving it too shallowly rooted in individual relationships and secondary structures. Congregational structures can be slow and challenging to work with, and it is easy to circumvent this by creating alternative structures which gather people without needing to engage the messy process of working with congregations. Evangelicals have a well attested propensity to create para-church structures and to use them to focus on pursuing Church unity.¹² As beautiful and powerful as such unity movements can be, they lack the depth and staying power that is possible when trust develops in the web of congregational relationships in a broader city context.

Pursuit of an intentional structural commitment to Church unity will prioritize the TESP's which the research for this project has identified. It will encourage participation in the boundary spanning process which develops the inter-congregational trust formed by a posture of open humility towards other congregations. By engaging in a process which formalizes inter-congregational relationships in a way that weaves them into congregational structures, the relationship between congregations can involve more people and extend beyond the life span of a few inter-personal relationships.

The TrueCity network's experience bears this out. A partnership agreement process was first put in place because there was a need for congregations to have a way

¹² Grenz, *Renewing*, 295. Grenz calls this propensity "parachurchicity" and contends that it has hampered Evangelicals from doing the ecclesiological work needed to understand the importance of the Church.

to formally indicate that they were committed to be core members in the network. The process required the board of each congregation to sign off on a partnership agreement.¹³ When it was decided to institute this process, it was not recognized just how challenging or significant it would prove to be to have each congregation's leadership group ratify such an agreement. The boards of all the congregations that have entered into partnership have had to work through questions of why this is important on the one hand and whether it is too risky to commit to on the other. Over time it was realized that it was important that these partnership agreements come back up for renewal every 3-5 years in order for the agreements to remain active and alive for these congregations. Having a partnership agreement in place has been found to significantly increase the likelihood of on-going involvement especially when a pastoral transition happens. So, while these congregational structures are difficult to engage and tend to move slowly, when they take the step of formally committing to something it generally sustains involvement beyond leadership transitions.

The importance of structural engagement came out in some of the interviews done for this project. Pastor Janice spoke to the importance of engaging congregational structures when she shared, "So for me, it wasn't enough for our pastoral team to be on board with TrueCity. We also had to have the board." Pastor Quinn describes a similar sentiment when he stated, "So, our pastors were enthusiastic because of their contact with other churches, and we were able to inspire the board and then that trickled down

¹³ "The Board" is what most but not all the congregations involved in TrueCity call their official, primary leadership committee. There are differences in polity among the congregations but all of them have an internal leadership structure capable of committing to a partnership agreement.

to the rest of the congregation.” Pastor Harold captured the significance of this most powerfully when he related the impact of meeting with the boards of other churches,

So just being able to walk into a board meeting of a congregation and interact about the purpose and values and structure of TrueCity helped build a lot more trust because they listened to us and then they asked me to come back to talk further. Once that began to happen repeatedly, then I said, okay, there's this momentum. I've always been very committed to the unity of the body, but there weren't a lot of practical expressions of that until I began to meet with boards.

When core congregational structures such as boards get engaged in inter-congregational unity initiatives it is a clear indicator of greater depth of congregational engagement.

By using an inclusivist Free Church ecclesiological frame of reference to explore the best way forward for enriching Church unity, the full range of congregational structures which are central to the ecclesial ecology of our local context and the possibilities for how they can relate to each other can be seen. If, alongside of developing rich inter-personal relationships, ways to get the structural aspects of these congregations to formally commit to on-going involvement can be found, this deepens and sustains unity initiatives over the long haul.

Unity at the City Church Level

The ecclesial ecology that exists in each local context nearly always includes multiple congregations. While Free Church ecclesiology rightly views the unity within the congregations as primary and foundational, a weakness of such an ecclesiology is that it pays insufficient attention to the relationships between congregations. There are limits to how many people any individual can directly relate to and so in order to pursue unity in an entity as large and complex as the global Church additional structures must be

involved.¹⁴ As the most basic and pervasive structure in the global Church, congregations play a vital role in how unity gets lived out. For there to be robust unity in a city Church context there must be a structural reality for how congregations come to relate to each other. Denominational structures provide one way that multiple congregations relate, but for broader unity that can bridge between traditions to develop in a city context other structures are needed.

This section explores how the New Testament call to unity can be understood to extend to the relationships between congregations in a city context from out of a Free Church ecclesiological perspective. It will be argued that all the congregations in a city are part of a city Church. This perspective adds weight to the importance of the insufficiently practiced mandate to pursue Church unity by strengthening the relationships between congregations in each city through deepening their trust for each other. When attention is given to the importance of Church unity it most often happens at the micro level within a congregation or at the macro level of the global ecumenical movement. It is the importance of pursuing it at the *meso* level of a city or region, however which is not sufficiently attended to. This *meso* level of unity is already in view in seed form in the New Testament, and with the way the Church has developed, where there are multiple congregations in nearly all contexts, it has become vitally important to understand congregations as being part of a larger city Church whole. An inclusivist Free Church perspective views the relationship between congregations in a city context as an existing informal network. While it recognizes that in this age, we will never fully escape the reality of division, it advocates for the creation of structures

¹⁴ Anthropologist Robin Dunbar's postulation is that an individual cannot maintain more than 150 meaningful relationships at one time. Dunbar, "Neocortex," 469.

which make it possible for these congregations to pursue Church reconciliation, so they become more fully inter-related in ways that make the reality of a city Church more visible.

A Free Church Understanding of City Church

The emphasis of Free Church ecclesiology is on the way that each congregation is a church in its own right because of its connection by the work of the Spirit to the risen Christ and the eschatological reality of the Church in the new creation. Not surprisingly then, churches that are part of this tradition focus almost exclusively on internal congregational dynamics, paying little if any attention to what the nature of the relationship between congregations within a city is. How to best describe those relationships is not a concern normally in view for those formed in this tradition. Volf frames the scriptural paradigm for these relationships in terms of communion anticipating the eschatological whole, reserving the term unity for the age to come.¹⁵ He does contend that a church to be a church must be open to relationship with all other churches, and that this should go beyond simply acknowledging their existence and move towards actual relationship.¹⁶ But because from a Free Church ecclesiological standpoint overarching structures do not have an eccleial constituting role, he contends we should not describe them as in some sense Church.¹⁷ He recognizes the importance of congregations relating and postulates the need for network structures so that this can happen but does not understand such structures to be a dimension of Church.¹⁸

¹⁵ Volf, *Likeness*, 158.

¹⁶ Volf, *Likeness*, 156–157.

¹⁷ Volf, *Likeness*, 155.

¹⁸ Volf, *Likeness*, 275.

Koivisto on the other hand argues that all the congregations in a city/region should be understood to be part of the Church in that place. He contends from the way the word *ekklēsia* gets used in the New Testament that there are two levels of local church, the house churches, which are smaller units gathering frequently and the city Church made up of all believers in multiple congregations which gather as a whole infrequently.¹⁹ Koivisto equates house churches with our current experience of congregations. He believes that to our detriment with our focus on congregational reality, we have lost sight of there being a city Church.²⁰ He references the biblical scholarship of Abraham J. Malherbe who understands Paul as having differentiated his use of the term *ekklēsia* between home churches and city Churches and that the former were understood to be part of the latter.²¹ Malherbe argues this based on his contention that Paul wrote one letter to the Church in a city even though there were multiple house churches located there, expecting that these letters would circulate. He lays out his evidence for the existence of multiple house churches in Rome and Corinth and suggests this was the case in Thessalonica and Colossi as well.²²

Based on this Koivisto holds that the majority of times that the word *ekklēsia* is used it is in fact referring to the city Churches as distinct from house churches and draws from this the implication that by focusing so intently on congregational expressions we have lost an important scriptural emphasis. Long argues for the existence of a city-wide Church along similar lines contending that the only division of the Church that the apostles accepted was one based on geography, and that they

¹⁹ Koivisto, *One Lord, One Faith*, 27.

²⁰ Koivisto, *One Lord, One Faith*, 27–29.

²¹ Malherbe, *Social Aspects*, 70.

²² Malherbe, *Social Aspects*, 70.

understood there to be only one Church in any city. He contends that this geographic framing of the Church continued through the first 1500 years of Church history.²³

This project's argument is that Koivisto and Long are correct in their contention that there are city/regional Churches and that it has been an error to not give sufficient attention to them. Since Paul only differentiates the term *ekklēsia* on the basis of geography and in the vast majority of places where he makes such a distinction his reference is to the city or region where the Church he is addressing is situated,²⁴ this makes the most sense of the scriptural witness. It also makes the most sense of the benefits I have seen coming to congregations which function based on this paradigm. Volf has valid concerns which lead him to resist framing the relationship between congregations in terms of city Church since Episcopal ecclesiology would use this line of reasoning to argue for structures which have authority over congregations, holding that it is those structures which mediate ecclesiality. So, in contending for the reality of a city Church, it is not being argued that the New Testament prescribes a city Church structure with authority over congregations, but rather that all the congregations in a city are in fact in relationship with each other based on the work of the Spirit.

It is possible for all the congregations to be part of a larger city Church whole without it necessitating a hierarchical structure which has power over the congregations that are a part of it. Instead, we need to envision servant structures which can broker thicker relationships between congregations so that the reality of city Church comes into

²³ Long, *City-Wide Church*, 61.

²⁴ It is important to recognize that there are alternative perspectives on how the term *ekklēsia* was used and to what extent a city Church was in view for Paul. In contrast to Malherbe, Banks concludes that the idea of a unified regional Church is foreign to Paul's thinking. Banks, *Community*, 37. Adams in reviewing the past twenty-five years of scholarship on this question contends that there is no consensus on this point. Adams, "Models," 76. The ambiguity of New Testament scholarship's view on this point argues for the need for nuance in how we understand the existence and functioning of a city Church.

clearer relief. The importance the New Testament gives to the unity between all believers in a city context, and the implications this has for the inter-relationship of all congregations needs to be recognized as a dimension of the Church. Developing the trust between congregations in a city Church context is therefore an important part of the Church reconciliation congregations are called to pursue. When this happens the construct of Church in a city context takes on a reality that is a powerful witness in that place.

A Realist Framing of a City Church Calling

The contention here is that it is meaningful to talk about there being a city Church of which all the congregations that exist in the city are a part, and that the quality of the relationships between those congregations plays a significant role in determining the spiritual vitality of that place. The Spirit encourages and empowers initiative which pays close attention to the relationships between congregations working to cultivate trust between them. A congregation's ecclesiality is not determined by those relationships, but its health is strengthened or diminished by how it participates. The more Church reconciliation work that has been done through developing inter-congregational trust, the healthier the city Church will be.

There are a variety of polities at work in the midst of each city Church reality which determine who leads which congregations (and groups of congregations) and the terms upon which such leadership is framed. The existence of and participation in all such structures has to be understood as a mix of the faithful following of God's leading and the hubris of fallen human initiative. None of our structures, or the leaders who

inhabit them, escapes acting out of such a mixture. The primary responsibility is faithfulness within the structural sphere inhabited with the authority God gives. Part of faithfulness within one structural sphere is building trust with those in other spheres. As trust between spheres grows stronger, the Spirit will initiate and empower more interaction across those spheres. Because the congregations are all connected to each other by the work of the Spirit, all would do well to learn to relate to each other and learn from each other. To function as a city Church, structures are necessary, but in this age, while living as the pilgrim Church such structures need to remain minimal with a focus on facilitating deeper cooperative relationships rather than concentrating power.²⁵

In conceptualizing the relationship across structural spheres in our city Church context it will work best to establish light structures through an integration of partnership development and network facilitation. Partnership development recognizes the importance of congregational structures establishing mutually beneficial relationships, ones which recognize and organize around the differing strengths of those involved laying out procedures and goals that serve all. Partnership pays closer attention to formal structures. It is a more formal way of relating. Its primary mode of engagement is collaboration where the congregations involved establish shared goals and plans in order to do events and projects together.

Network facilitation on the other hand, is particularly advantageous for engaging a broader group of people, recognizing and tapping the creativity latent in the periphery of the inter-relationships between the congregations involved, and building more robust

²⁵ The term “pilgrim Church” comes from Catholic ecclesiological writings which recognize the difference between how the Church understands itself and functions in this age and how it will be when the new creation comes. See *Lumen Gentium* sec. 48.

alignment. It functions more powerfully in informal settings. Its primary mode of engagement is to stimulate cooperation where those involved share information, personnel and other resources with each other while having separate goals and planning processes.

Partnership development's emphasis on structures is important for congregational leadership to buy-in but runs the danger of stifling grassroots initiative (or failing to recognize it). Its more formal mode of functioning tends to bring congregational leaders into relationship with each other. It works well for initially developing trust. It requires more investment of leadership time and focus so there are limits to how much it can be engaged. Network facilitation's emphasis on building cooperation through relational connections is powerful but can bypass congregational leadership in ways that diminish congregational ownership and participation. It builds off established relationships and deepens trust. There are limits to the usefulness of either of these on their own, but in combination they reinforce and strengthen each other. This is particular the case in the Canadian context where low power distance is so characteristic of the culture. Canadian city Church structures need to be as flat as possible which puts the onus for inter-congregational trust building on the relational skills of the pastors and other congregational leaders involved.

This combination of partnership development and network facilitation provide the resources needed to humbly engage in Church reconciliation, moving us forward in an interim setting while avoiding the hubris of supposed ultimate solutions. Such a realist posture understands that division is something we will always be wrestling with as the pilgrim church. It recognizes division is the result of sin, but that we cannot fully

escape this reality in this age. The call is to give as much as possible to diminish division even though it is recognized that it will not be fully solved. It is equally dangerous to entertain the hubris of believing the problem can be solved on the one hand and to refuse to work for unity because it cannot be solved on the other. The argument here is that when God looks at a city context, he sees all the congregations as an inter-connected whole and longs for them to be more vitally connected. Partnership development and network facilitation are practical strategies that allow believers to recognize and strengthen that interconnectedness so that the reality of city Church becomes more visible. They are ways to tangibly engage Church reconciliation.

A realist perspective differentiates between division and divisiveness. There are differences of perspective which come from the diversity of traditions and cultures which are at work among us.²⁶ Such differences get experienced as division when congregations with diverse ways of following Christ bump up against the contradictions that those differences create. Some of those contradictions are the result of sin at work in various congregations. Others are the result of the limited ability to grasp the good which exists beyond human comprehension in what is being lived out in those alternative expressions.²⁷ Teasing out where what is needed is repentance from sin on the one hand versus where what is needed is to recognize an enriching alternative perspective on the other is a crucial task the Church never completes.²⁸ So, on this side of the *eschaton* there will always be division that the city Church needs to work to

²⁶ Murray, "Receptive Ecumenism," 8.

²⁷ Radner, *A Brutal Unity*, 462–463.

²⁸ Hauerwas, "Which Church?," 267.

overcome. This is the task of Church reconciliation which each city Church is called to engage.

Divisiveness is different. It is the willful practice of creating and increasing division. It is never an acceptable practice. It is often motivated by money, power, and pride, but also by fear and passivity. It characterizes the systems and structures of the various traditions within the city Church in ways to which there is too often a blindness. This is what the exhortation in Titus 3:10–11 is pointing us to. It states, “Warn a divisive person once, and then warn him a second time. After that, have nothing to do with him. You may be sure that such a man is warped and sinful; he is self-condemned (Titus 3:10–11).” Divisiveness keeps the city Church from realizing the riches inherent in its diversity. Building the capacity to stand together against such divisiveness is also core to the Church reconciliation calling of each city Church.

A Free Church ecclesiology helpfully gives lenses to see the central role that congregations play in the life of the Church, but it does not tend to adequately equip believers to envision the relationship between those congregations in a city context. The concept of a city Church made up of the inter-relationship of all the congregations and other Christian structures provides a meaningful and important framework for describing this reality. It opens a way to consider how to faithfully steward these relationships and provides a broader horizon for pursuing the call to unity. While some degree of division will continue to characterize the relationships between congregations from different traditions, through partnership development and network facilitation the process of Church reconciliation can be engaged, thereby tangibly deepening the unity of the city Church. This does not happen by homogenizing all the different

congregational expressions, but by recognizing and embracing the differing gifts that each of these congregations have to contribute to the whole. To adequately value this and learn to do it better the implications of the mark of catholicity in our local context need to be grasped more fully.

Local Catholicity

Catholicity is one of the four marks of the Church captured in the Nicene Creed.²⁹ All of these marks are understood to characterize the Church by definition wherever it exists. These marks of the Church are first and foremost a gift God gives and secondarily (but significantly) a vision God intends the Church to live towards. Of the four, catholicity is the least accessible to those from a Free Church background. The idea of the Church being one, holy, and apostolic all connect with lived theology within this tradition, but catholicity remains generally inscrutable. This is unfortunate because it provides the resources to respond to the challenge of how to embrace the broader diversity of the Church and more fully join God in his reconciling mission.

Catholicity describes the reality that there is a core universality of the Church throughout time and around the world which embraces and is enhanced by the particularity of each congregation and the believers that make them up. Catholicity is the mark of the Church which brings into view the differentiated nature of the Church's unity, the fact that it is a body made up of diverse parts and that the extent of its diversity glorifies God.³⁰ Catholicity is a foundational characteristic that by faith is held to be true of the Church. It is understood to be a gift of God made possible by Christ and

²⁹ The Nicene Creed states, "We believe in one, holy, catholic and apostolic church."

³⁰ Volf, *Likeness*, 262.

produced by the Spirit, and while it will only fully be realized in the new creation, it is an attribute God calls the Church by the power of the Spirit to work toward realizing more fully here and now.³¹

Catholicity has both a quantitative and qualitative dimension to it.³² Following the work of Robert Schreiter these dimensions will be related to the characteristics of wholeness and fullness.³³ The quantitative dimension characterized by wholeness describes the extent of the relational connectedness through which the Church's grasp of the gospel is enlarged. It highlights God's intent to expand the connections so that the witness to what God has done in Christ by the power of the Spirit reaches ever farther and wider. The qualitative dimension characterized by fullness describes the fidelity of the relationships with an emphasis on how the gospel is enriching the Church. It highlights God's intent to deepen the Church's grasp of the gospel by continually enhancing the vibrancy of those connections.

Catholicity is most often studied with a macro-level view of the Church in focus, and the various explorations of wholeness and fullness have tended to privilege this perspective.³⁴ As important as this input is, unless the form it would take locally can be envisioned, it can too easily remain theoretical. So, in order to better grasp the implications of wholeness and fullness for a city Church context some translation is necessary.³⁵

³¹ Kärkkäinen, "Catholicity," 10.

³² A number of authors highlight these dimensions: see Volf, *Likeness*, 265; Kärkkäinen, "Catholicity," 8–9; Guder, *Called to Witness*, 85–86; and Van Gelder, *Essence*, 118–19.

³³ Schreiter, *The New Catholicity*, 128–31.

³⁴ Schreiter's treatment is most influential: see *New Catholicity*, 127–31. But see also Kirch, "Lived Catholicity," 158; Kuo, "New Reformed Catholicity," 168–170; and, for a variation, Kärkkäinen, "Catholicity," 9. Who adds a third temporal dimension.

³⁵ Essick and Medly, "Local Catholicity," 48.

The Wholeness Dimension

At the macro level the wholeness dimension of catholicity describes the extensive, quantitative way the Church takes root in an ever-growing number of cultural contexts. As the gospel does its work towards the horizon of the new creation, the Church takes root in every tribe, nation, and tongue.³⁶ To grasp the actual wholeness the Church has today one has to consider the extent to which the Church has connected with linguistic and cultural groups around the globe. To look towards the potential wholeness, one has to envision all of the possible ways the Church could reach further than it has. The eschatological maximum of wholeness provides a picture of what God will ultimately achieve. Wholeness points to the truth that because the gospel is infinitely translatable into every context, the global nature of the Church is one of diversity. The emphasis is on how this process diversifies the witness of the Church, making healing accessible and exposing idolatries within each culture through the witness of the congregations that take root there. As the gospel does its work, congregations are led to focus special attention on the places where asymmetrical power dynamics are sources of ongoing injustice.³⁷ Catholicity as wholeness both values and relativizes every culture. It teaches that the Church in each culture has something important to offer, but that there is no culture within which the Church has all the gifts or a full grasp of the truth of who God is and what he has done.³⁸ The perspectives and insights which each culture has are needed in order to begin to adequately worship God.

³⁶ Guder, *Called to Witness*, 86.

³⁷ Schreiter, *New Catholicity*, 129–30.

³⁸ Van Gelder, *Essence*, 119–20.

At the local level, wholeness describes the extent to which the Church has permeated a particular city context and is already a reality. It points to the way each congregation and all the Christians who live, work, play, and worship in this place are witnessing to the reality of Christ in the culture and making new connections within the Church which enlarge the grasp of the gospel. Wholeness references how many gospel enriching relationships are possible between structures and the individuals who make them up, and it gives a vision for all the myriads of potential connections that the Spirit is leading the Church to work toward. Wholeness recognizes the reality that every Christian is a part of the network of interrelatedness that is the Church.³⁹

Congregations play a central role in the development of wholeness. Volf and Kärkkäinen rightly argue that a key measure of the health of a congregation is their openness to recognizing that they are one among many congregations and that they need to be open to cooperative relationship with all others who gather in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ.⁴⁰ This is the extent of their catholicity. The same Spirit that connects these congregations also leads them into relationship with each other in ways that will put the divine relational reality on display for a watching world. When new congregations are started, when new relationships between congregations develop, and when new cooperative ventures are launched for the sake of the gospel, the wholeness dimension of local catholicity is extended.

³⁹ While a Christian can claim to not be part of a congregation, she will in some way be connected to other Christians who are part of a congregation, even if it is only in watching a YouTube video or in reading a Gideon Bible. While God's intention is for much deeper integration (fullness), no one can be a Christian without some type of connection.

⁴⁰ Volf, *Likeness*, 275 and Kärkkäinen, "Catholicity," 12. Volf and Kärkkäinen actually state this more strongly by making this a requirement for being a true church.

Wholeness points to the reality that each congregation's grasp of the gospel and ability to live it out more fully will be enhanced as connections are made with other congregations from other streams of the Church. It is crucial to recognize that while common ground is necessary for relationships to form, relating across differences is particularly powerful. The Church in a place cannot be all God intends for it to be unless there are congregations relating across differences. Having a network of congregations that through partnership development and network facilitation are pursuing collaborative relationships creates a context to invite new congregations to join in on. By engaging in this the process of building inter-congregational trust through boundary spanning work, broader wholeness can be engaged. This is a key local frontier for Church reconciliation.

The Fullness Dimension

The fullness dimension of catholicity describes the qualitative way the Church is enriched as the various congregations and other entities which make it up come to a deeper experience and understanding of the gospel through their Spirit-led interactions with each other.

In the process the Church's experience of God's work in her midst is deepened and made more vibrant as individual and collective relationships are healed and strengthened.

At the macro level the focus is on the relationship between Churches in different cultures. As the gospel takes root and bears fruit in each of their cultural contexts, these Churches come to experience the gospel in new and deeper ways through the unique

view that the other culture has on the implications of the gospel. Since the view within one culture is made accessible to the other as they relate across their differences, the Church is enriched. In the process each culture comes to more fully realize its God-given potential. It is a process that enhances diversity rather than truncating it. The Church brings the narrative of the Christ-event at the heart of the gospel into dialogue with the narrative at the heart of the culture, transforming the culture in a way that unleashes new insights which then engage with the storylines of other cultures. As the gospel engages those core cultural narratives through the Church, it unleashes God's goodness, heals brokenness, and uproots idolatries. In the process of establishing greater wholeness, it grows the Church's fullness so that it is further equipped to connect with still more cultures.

Within any given culture the focus is on the process whereby the relationship between different congregations develops so as to enhance the internal witness to that culture by providing a lived expression of the gospel. While clearly human sinfulness has figured prominently in the development of alternative Church traditions, the argument here is that it is only when there are multiple congregations relating with love and respect across their alternative perspectives that a culture has full access to the reality of the gospel. Macro-level fullness describes how the Church in differing cultures lives out the reality of the gospel. Local fullness describes the vibrancy of the gospel witnessing relationships between congregations within a specific geographic setting, recognizing that in such settings there is a dominant culture and multiple sub-cultures in the mix.

What is true at the macro level is also true at the local level, which means that each congregation has an experience and an understanding of the implications of the gospel that is its gift to share with other congregations. And each congregation will be enriched as ways are found to receive the gift that other congregations have to offer. At a local level the fullness dimension is seen at work as broken relationships between congregations are healed and as deeper trust grows where there was little or no relationship before. This is the essence of Church reconciliation. In the process of such deeper relationships between congregations developing, the process of reconciliation between parts of the culture also is engaged. Congregations become instruments of reconciliation and in the process become signs and foretastes of the Kingdom's work of reconciling all things in Christ. The greater the demographic differences and relational brokenness that is overcome, the more powerfully the fullness dimension is at work.

Fullness alerts us to the dynamic that each person and congregation comes bearing gifts which can be used by the Spirit in the context of relationship to deepen and expand another's grasp of the gospel, enriching their walk with Christ. It encourages a posture of generosity and expectancy when approaching those from other congregations. Because each person and congregation has gifts to share, contexts need to be created where gift exchanges can happen.⁴¹ Those who function as boundary spanners for their congregations do well to come into these relationships with a posture of trust which creates a context where more trust can develop. For this to be more fully lived out networks of congregations are needed which facilitate a healthy mix of collaboration

⁴¹ See O'Gara, "Receiving Gifts," 26–27 for a fuller discussion of this concept of the ecumenical gift exchange which God intends to have characterize the interaction between believers from different parts of the Church.

and cooperation so that the gospel gifts each congregation stewards can be offered and received.

Schreiter posits that different marks of the Church have assumed the most prominence at different points in the Church's history.⁴² He rightly believes that with the process of globalization and the rise of reactionary local resistance to its homogenizing impact, catholicity is the characteristic of the Church that is most need at this time of world history.⁴³ The disintegration of civility and Western culture's inability to dialogue across difference make this vitally important. Since catholicity is core to who the Church is in Christ by the power of the Spirit, within the essential character as the Church there are resources to listen well across differences and bring diverse insights into conversation with each other. This is the essential reconciliation work that catholicity equips the Church to do.⁴⁴ A start is made on this lofty goal by learning to pursue greater wholeness and fullness in the local context of a city Church by developing theological trust across differences.

The Role of Theological Trust

An important way of living out the reconciling work that the local catholic nature of the Church calls us to is by actively pursuing the development of theological trust. Such theological trust is the willingness to make oneself vulnerable by opening up to another about one's theological postures with the expectation that they will respect those postures and honestly and humbly engage with them. Developing such trust is a

⁴² Schreiter, *The New Catholicity*, 119.

⁴³ Schreiter, *The New Catholicity*, 118–19.

⁴⁴ Schreiter, *The New Catholicity*, 120–21.

complex process that defies easy description. It requires weaving together both good emotional intelligence and theological acumen into healthy practices of theological dialogue which both enhances theological insight and deepens relationships. In analyzing this project's research findings in chapter 3, four aspects of how it functions were identified. The first was recognizing common ground as it pertains to the essentials of the faith. The second was the ability to bracket emotionally held trigger issues which feel like essentials, but one comes to realize are not. Third was a willingness to engage in open, respectful dialogue where theological differences are encountered. The fourth was developing greater interpersonal trust so that there are sufficient resources to journey through theological differences. Such theological trust has an important part to play in the development of the inter-congregational trust which is central to local Church reconciliation. In our current cultural moment when polarization characterizes interactions within many parts of the Church, the ability to develop theological trust is crucially important.

This section will expand on what came out in the research analysis regarding theological trust by digging into the role it plays in the process of Church reconciliation as it expands the wholeness and deepens the fullness dimensions of catholicity. This section starts by exploring how theological trust grows the wholeness dimension. An important way that wholeness develops is by establishing theological trust in situations where there is currently no trust or even distrust. It requires one to wrestle with what common ground is required to embrace ecclesial others as fellow believers and begin to value their perspective on the faith that is shared in the context of the relationship. Second, the section will dig into how strengthening theological trust enriches the

fullness dimension. This requires letting existing theological trust function as a resource for the task of breaking down dividing walls and learning from differences. It necessitates taking the risk of facing differences with humility and openness, recognizing that God might challenge someone to change their thinking or reveal something new to them about who he is and how he is at work in the world around them. Finally, the postures and practices needed to increase theological trustworthiness will be explored. Borrowing from what the trust literature tells us about trustworthiness, it is postulated that by pursuing greater theological competence, theological integrity, and theological benevolence, theological trust can be enriched.

Expanding Local Wholeness: Establishing Theological Trust

To pursue the calling to Church reconciliation in a local context, one thing that must be done is to establish theological trust more broadly as a way of developing the wholeness dimension of catholicity. This is done by establishing common ground with new individuals and communities, embracing ecclesial others with whom there currently is no relationship. It requires one to wrestle with what common ground on the essentials of faith is necessary to embrace such ecclesial others as fellow believers and begin to value their perspective on the Christian faith.

The first step is to recognize the challenge of sectarianism in pursuing the broader connections which expand wholeness and assess how it infects one's posture towards ecclesial others. Sectarianism demands a uniformity in faith expression which goes beyond what God expects, denying the importance of diversity. It equates unity

with uniformity thereby narrowing the scope of who one will be open to engage.⁴⁵ It shuts down the willingness to explore relationships with those outside of one's own tradition. In a late Christendom cultural context such as the one in Hamilton, sectarianism remains characteristic of the context where the different Christian traditions understand themselves to be in competition with each other. The focus tends to be more on what is different and why those differences are problematic than on what is held in common and how diversity is a strength. The current post-pandemic cultural reality has exacerbated this tendency so that a polarization which prizes ideological loyalty over relational gentleness and humility has become characteristic of inter-congregational spaces. In such a setting it is imperative to understand how this sentiment continues to be at work in such contexts and how it diminishes the sense of calling to pursue greater wholeness as a way to live out the calling to Church reconciliation.

Sectarianism often leads to an unhelpful conflation of wholeness and fullness. There is not an adequate differentiation between the more limited common ground needed in order to expand wholeness and the more in-depth gospel-enriching relationships necessary to deepen fullness. Significant concerns may exist about the way that another group frames their position on an important issue yet if there is a belief that this group is in Christ, the call to be open to relate and thus expand wholeness exists. Fullness can only be deepened when the pursuit of wholeness has done its work by establishing a relationship. The realist perspective on Church unity which was described earlier recognizes that the divisions the Church in any given context experiences can

⁴⁵ Koivisto, *One Lord, One Faith*, 44–45.

only be overcome slowly and with hard work. It is not possible to overcome all the divisions in this current age. The differences that exist and concerns that arise out of them may impede the deepening of fullness, but as long as there is a wholeness connection established, the Spirit has freedom to work.

Second, the multi-faceted nature of faith needs to be embraced and the implications of this for how theological trust develops acknowledged. One way to describe this is to recognize the role of orthodoxy, orthopraxy, and orthopathy in faith development. Orthodoxy focuses on right belief. It is the cognitive dimension of faith. It is the dimension that lends itself most to the comparisons and contrasts that are a part of a critical reasoning process in discerning what the essentials of faith truly are.⁴⁶ It is also the dimension that requires the least amount of relationship to assess common ground, and so too often it is given greater weight than the other dimensions in determining to what extent interaction is possible. Orthopraxy is right practice. It is the volitional dimension of faith. In a local context where personal contact is more prevalent, recognizing the commonalities and differences in practice happens more readily, and so this dimension of faith comes more into play. Orthopathy is right affections. It is the emotive dimension of faith. To assess this dimension of another person's faith requires more personal interaction and so it is more difficult to engage when pursuing the initial development of theological trust which characterizes wholeness. Genuine faith in Christ will equally shine forth in all these dimensions and the interactions between them. To assess only one to the exclusion of the others can easily be misleading. So, recognizing

⁴⁶ This is likely more the case in a western cultural context where critical reasoning is this emphasis and where categorizing in order to make distinctions is the mode for interaction between different groups.

that orthodoxy will be engaged first, care must be given to not let that one dimension unnecessarily block engagement of the other dimensions. Orthodoxy is important but not solely important.

Expanding wholeness starts by working to establish a confidence that there are sufficiently shared essentials of the faith so that there is adequate common ground in the orthodoxy dimension. One way of assessing orthodoxy is to use the Apostles' Creed or the Nicene Creed. These have proven helpful because they were formulated early in the Church's history and have come to be understood as capturing the essence of what is most important for an orthodox understanding of the Christian faith.⁴⁷ At the very least, they provide a good starting point for those from diverse traditions as they both capture essential beliefs and symbolize a commitment to finding common ground. This is the reason that TrueCity has chosen to use the Apostles' Creed as our central doctrinal statement. It was found however, that some of the pastors involved in the network wanted additional statements added since this creed does not address beliefs about scripture and only minimally touches on atonement. For this reason, it was necessary to lay out some additional doctrinal statements which were framed as contextual to this time and place.

This highlights the reality that while the creeds can be used symbolically as a commitment to keeping the needed common ground to a minimum, the felt need for

⁴⁷ There is a tradition within Evangelical circles of using Statements of Faith to decide who to associate with or not. This is part of a longer history among Protestants of establishing theological essentials by using confessions and catechisms. There is significant value in framing core theology, but the use of these documents to decide whether to be in relationship with other believers privileges the orthodoxy dimension of faith in an unhelpful way.

common ground is likely different than the specifics the creeds express. Pastor Quinn captured this reality best when in his interview he shared,

I think if we're unified on the absolute bare essentials of what faith is that should be enough. I lean to a very small set of these essentials. So, for me, I need you to say that God created the world. That humans are created in the image of God. I need you to say that somehow the world is not the way it's meant to be. You don't need to use the word sin, but that in the world there's a separation between us and God. I need you to say that Jesus is the way, and the truth and the life or that Jesus is uniquely God. That the cross is essential but that we do not know what truly happened there. We know that it's important and central, but what that exactly looks like is a mystery. That the Holy Spirits is here to support us. And that one day Christ will come back. I don't need much, if you can say something that would sounds somewhat like that, I can call you my brother or my sister. And even then, you don't have to even say all that, if you're trusting in Jesus that might be enough.

Pastor Larry laid out his own essentials when he shared,

For me, it's the theology around Jesus first and foremost. So, if a person disputes, the bodily resurrection of Jesus, I just find there's hardly the possibility of Christian fellowship. If a person affirms the historicity of Jesus' resurrection, to me, that's the key, that's, that's the moment of communion at some level. And then you kind of work out from there in widening circles that become less important. So, if you affirm the historicity of Jesus, you're likely going to affirm the historic identity of Jesus and the historic ministry of Jesus, his miracles, his Virgin birth, not necessarily, but likely and really those are the key issues for me. And whether you accept the historicity of the Exodus or something like that, that's really secondary for me.

The reality is that each person has their own way of framing the essentials and while the creeds provide a reasonable starting point, each one will be looking for something a bit different and usually a bit more in order for theological trust to start to form. But as Pastor Quinn acknowledges, if one senses that someone trusts Jesus (which is about orthopathy) it may well be enough.

The recognition of this came out in the research findings, if one focuses exclusively on orthodoxy, it can create trouble. Pastor Kurt captured this sentiment when he shared,

Except you can never be orthodox enough. And at some point, you're going to find points of divergence and then you have to decide how important are these points of divergence. So, orthodoxy certainly has a place in maybe building the fence around your collaboration, but orthodoxy can't be everything.

Pastor Janice names something similar when she relates, “So I grieve sometimes when people will pick certain theological issues or topics or the idea that there has to be total theological uniformity in order to trust each other. I do grieve that as churches, we have picked very particular theological stances or ecclesiological stances. And we've said that is a sign of whether the church is trustworthy or not.” It is problematic when in determining whether wholeness is possible the assessment of another's faith commitment is limited exclusively to orthodoxy. This is functioning in a sectarian way which will create significant challenges for pursuing Church reconciliation.

In a local context where enough relationship is possible so that one can get a better sense of the orthopraxy and orthopathy of another, these can provide needed perspective for getting a read on orthodoxy. As Pastor Kurt shares, “So I find orthopathy, in terms of a person's character and affections and Christ-like attitudes, is what builds trust.” Pastor Oliver expresses it like this, “That's my baseline, if they clearly love Jesus and they are passionate to pursue his kingdom then I want to fight my hardest to preserve the relationship.” As one has the opportunity to observe the patterns in the lives of others, orthopraxy can be assessed. Where fruitful patterns that look like Jesus' way of life are recognized, notice should be taken and that witness should be allowed to impact one's assessment. Likewise, as opportunities arise to interact with

people and hear what motivates them and matters to them, orthopathy can be assessed. When it is clear that they love Jesus and desire to see his Kingdom come, notice should be taken of this as well.

In pursuing greater wholeness then the issue is how far one can stretch rather than how one can keep safe. How does one determine the needed common ground in order to relate to each other? The search is for living faith centered in Jesus Christ. One way to be able to identify such faith is by paying attention to when a humble, joyful willingness to interact with a new acquaintance because of a perceived shared faith is encountered. Sectarianism's propensity to lead one to shun another believer because of a disagreement on something beyond the essentials of the faith is something to be alert for. The multi-dimensional way that faith gets lived out needs to be recognized and attention must be paid to orthopraxy and orthopathy as well as orthodoxy.

It must be acknowledged that while there is an objectively true answer to the question of what the necessary common ground is, one will only begin to approach it from within one's subjective understanding. Critical realism helps at this point by naming the reality that while there is an objectively true approach to the need for common ground, no one has a full grasp of what it is. Reality can only be known in part. While beliefs can and should be expressed, this can only be done subjectively, there must be an openness to a better, fuller description being offered. Gaining a better grasp of the objective reality will by necessity be an iterative process which must engage abductively. Humility is crucial. God can be trusted to lead his people into truth, recognizing this will happen best as different traditions and those who steward them interact with each other. The divisions which characterize the city Church will never be

fully overcome, but by actively working to diminish divisions through building trust in new relationships, the wholeness dimension can be faithfully pursued, making it possible to more fully live into the calling to Church reconciliation.

Deepening Local Fullness: Strengthening Theological Trust

The fullness dimension of catholicity is engaged when believers relate with each other in ways that take them deeper in their relationships with Jesus Christ. Theological trust plays a central role in how this happens. It is in pursuing this fullness dimension that believers can most intently engage in Church reconciliation. To the extent that the wholeness dimension has been developed by making the connections through establishing theological trust more broadly, work can then be done based on that trust to engage the fullness dimension. It necessitates taking the risk of facing differences with humility and an openness to how God might call for revised thinking or open up something new about who he is and how he is at work in the world.

In the same way that sectarianism thwarts the development of wholeness, minimalism is the enemy of fullness. Minimalism downplays the importance of the connection between orthodoxy and living faith in the other. In the name of inclusion, it advocates for accepting others' doctrinal views as if each person is entitled to their own opinion. The content of each person's doctrine and the way those beliefs get lived out and the affection one has for Christ all matter.⁴⁸ While there needs to be openness to differences, there should not be acceptance of a belief or life pattern just because it is different. Fullness comes when one engages with another passionately and deeply. If

⁴⁸ Ortlund, *Finding the Right Hills*, 45.

something is minimized just to keep the peace, this is not the pursuit of fullness which God desires.

What has been learned through the TrueCity experience though is that there must be a commitment to relationship continuing even when disagreement is encountered for hard conversations to be fruitfully engaged. Pastor Gord named this reality when he shared,

We had that conversation quite intentionally when we were coming up with a partnership agreement to say that in order to work out the theological stuff, our commitment to one another has to be significant enough to hold the tension. The ultimatum of it's my way, or I leave, which we called "the gun on the table," that gun has to be taken off the table, or we can't have a fruitful conversation. It can't be "this way or I'm gone" if we are going to engage the hard things in this conversation. I think right there was where that commitment to the relationship first was kind of forged. And then out of that the conversations can happen.

Sectarianism has created a climate that breeds minimalism. People are hesitant to have the hard conversations because of the tendency for one group or the other to leave the relationship when they encounter a significant difference. At those points one has to lean hard into the theological trust that has already been established in order to navigate through the storms brought on by the differences one encounters.

One way the TrueCity network has worked at this is by developing a way to frame theological spectrums which recognize the importance of staying in relationship when we encounter theological differences which are not essentials of the faith. We first encountered an issue we needed to navigate in this way early in the history of TrueCity when we found that we had congregations with differing core theological postures

towards baptism (see *figure 2*). The spectrum recognizes that while congregations can

A Closed Paedobaptists	B Open Paedobaptists	C Open Believer's Baptists	D Closed Believer's Baptists
Those who believe that children should be baptized based on the faith of their parents and are closed to being in relationship with those who hold to a theology of believer's baptism	Those who believe that children should be baptized based on the faith of their parents but are open to relationship with those who hold to a theology of believer's baptism	Those who believe that only adults who have personally come to a place of faith should be baptized but are open to relationship with those who hold to a theology of paedobaptism	Those who believe that only adults who have personally come to a place of faith should be baptized and are closed to being in relationship with those who hold to a theology of paedobaptism

Figure 2—Baptism Spectrum

have different positions on baptism, they also have a choice as to how they will respond to congregations that have a different theology. Both positions on baptism face the same choice when it comes to how they will relate across the theological divide on the issue. It was recognized that only those in positions B and C would be willing to be involved if the network was to include congregations with differing postures on this issue. Since the network can leave baptism practices up to the individual congregations, no collective practice is necessary.

A few years into our history we faced a second theological issue, the acceptable role of women in church leadership, which threatened to divide us. We approached it the same way (see *figure 3*), but this time we faced a subsequent challenge in that we had to decide whether it was an acceptable practice to have women speakers at our

A Closed Complementarian	B Open Complementarian	C Open Egalitarian	D Closed Egalitarian
Those who believe that only men should be in leadership roles in churches and are closed to being in relationship with those who hold to an egalitarian theology of leadership	Those who believe that only men should be in leadership roles in churches but are open to being in relationship with those who hold to an egalitarian theology of leadership	Those who believe that men and women should have equal access to church leadership roles but are open to relationship with those who hold to a complementarian theology	Those who believe that men and women should have equal access to church leadership roles and are closed to relationship with those who hold to a complementarian theology

Figure 3—Female Leadership Spectrum

yearly conference. The necessity of a joint practice made navigating the spectrum more

challenging. The challenge of settling on common practices is what makes navigating these and other such theological issues more difficult in a congregational and denominational setting. We decided that having women speak at the conference was an acceptable common practice, but that speakers should refrain from advocating for their view on this issue when speaking at TrueCity events.

We have sought to encourage theological dialogue on these and other theological issues for which there is a spectrum of belief. What has been found is that such dialogue rarely shifts anyone's core view on an issue, but it has deepened the understanding of why people believe what they do and helped those involved treat each other's views with greater respect. In this way the theological trust that exists in the network has been leveraged to deepen the fullness dimension of catholicity that characterizes the network.

Enriching Theological Trustworthiness

The research on the antecedents of trust suggests that there are characteristics of the trustee which make it more likely they will be trusted. This is framed as trustworthiness and is an important determinant of trust. At the inter-personal level, it is most often understood to be made up of the characteristics of competence, integrity, and benevolence.⁴⁹ The contention here is that the practices which tend to make someone theologically trustworthy can be framed around these same three characteristics, and that such trustworthiness is essential for living out the call to Church reconciliation by seeing wholeness expanded and fullness deepened.

⁴⁹ Baer and Colquitt, "Why Do People Trust?," 168.

To be theologically competent someone needs to have a good breadth of knowledge and the ability to articulate their own beliefs well. The more they understand of where their beliefs fit within the scope of the various streams of Christian tradition, can articulate the strongest arguments of the other streams, and have the ability to frame their beliefs in reference to the other various perspectives, the stronger the competence with which they function. Such competence has to do with their learning disciplines and how they continue to grow in both the breadth and depth of their grasp of different topics. It includes the way their life experience is integrated into their perspectives.

Theological integrity starts with a commitment to live out as best as possible what they believe. It involves recognizing the limits of their knowledge, where they have a good grasp of a topic and where they do not. Such integrity has a humility to it that does not project competence beyond what they have. There is an openness to alternative ideas, and a healthy curiosity which asks good questions to take a conversation deeper and to understand better. It recognizes the connections between beliefs and pursues integration. It recognizes the need for more learning and pursues that with others who have something to teach them.

Theological benevolence is the desire to see others have a stronger grasp of their own beliefs and the ability to articulate them well. It respects the viewpoints of others and seeks to draw out what is good and best in their perspective. It gently pursues places of weakness and contradiction in the way others articulate their beliefs out of a desire for them to grow rather than to one-up them. It recognizes when there is something to teach and pursues opportunities to do so as others are open to it.

Conclusion

In this chapter a practical ecclesiology which argues that congregations play a pivotal role in determining the quality of Church unity in a city context has been laid out. The relationship between congregations is a crucial locus for where Church unity can be enriched through the development of inter-congregational trust. This is a core dimension of the process of Church reconciliation. The chapter starts with a framing of an inclusivist Free Church ecclesiological position which argues that each assembly of people which is connected by the Spirit to the risen Christ is a church whether they understand their ecclesial reality in those terms or not. Next, the reality of a city Church which all the congregations in a place participate in is laid out. It is argued that congregations play a central role in the life of the Church in such local contexts, and that the relationships between these congregations matter. Following this, the contention is explored that in the present age, while sin is an ever-present reality, division will remain the experience of the Church, and yet this situation is not something to settle for but rather calls for a commitment to the pursuit of Church reconciliation. To do this requires a fuller embrace of a catholicity which seeks to expand the wholeness and to deepen the fullness of the Church. The chapter concludes with an exploration of how developing theological trust is integral to the pursuit of city Church reconciliation as it contributes to both the wholeness and fullness dimensions of local catholicity.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

Church reconciliation matters deeply to God. It is the process by which God kills the hostility which separates us from one another within the Church so he can reconcile us in our diversity to himself as he reconciles us to one another (Eph 2:14–16). This process is what establishes Church unity and continues to deepen it. It is an important part of the larger process by which the Spirit enacts the Father's initiative, made possible by Christ's work on the cross, to reconcile all things to himself (Col 1:20). God calls us as the Church to join him in pursuing reconciliation (2 Cor 5:19). In this process, believers are both the agents and the locus of this reconciling activity. This dissertation has laid out one important way that Church reconciliation gets worked out by congregations and the boundary spanning leaders who function representatively of them, through deepening the trust between congregations in a city context.

For the past twenty years, the group of congregations which make up the TrueCity network in Hamilton, ON have given the Spirit greater freedom to do this work of breaking down dividing walls and enriching the unity between our congregations. We have participated in a boundary spanning process which has deepened our experience of inter-congregational trust by committing to rhythms of meeting together regularly, praying for and with each other, and engaging missional collaboration opportunities. The increased trust that developed, and the more tangible experience of unity which it opened up, has been a striking experience for which there

has not been an explanation. The dissertation project has aimed to explicate that experience and recognize its theological significance. It is a practice-led, practical ecclesiological exploration of an important way that congregations can participate with God in the ministry of reconciliation to which he calls the Church.

The problem this dissertation has addressed is how to best understand the way in which this enriched unity developed between the congregations that have been part of the TrueCity network. The trust that has developed between these congregations has made Church unity a more tangible reality. The research question then was, how did the inter-congregational trust which characterized this unity develop? A theory has been laid out of how by prioritizing practices which embed trust in congregational cultures, these congregations and the leaders who represent them participate in a five-phase boundary spanning process by which inter-congregational trust develops. When such inter-congregational trust is cultivated, congregations live into their calling to pursue Church reconciliation. Understanding this boundary spanning process equips congregations to better join with the Spirit's work of pursuing Church reconciliation in the specific locale where they are situated so that a more robust catholicity comes to characterize the Church. One in which differentiated unity continually broadens the wholeness and deepens the fullness of the Church in that place.

Significance of this Project

This dissertation project has significance on four fronts. First, this project has significance for those working to foster Church unity in local settings. Because this is a research-based study exploring the actual experience of a group of congregations

committed to missional collaboration and the Church unity that resulted from their efforts, it provides input for those in other local settings who are similarly aiming to develop greater missional collaboration and enrich Church unity. This research points to the importance of both developing bi-lateral relationships between congregations and participating in a broader network of congregations in a way that enriches the overall unity in that locale. It recognizes these pursuits as mutually reinforcing and postulates that you cannot sustain one without aiming to do both. It highlights the importance of the boundary spanning work that congregational leaders and particularly pastors do by building inter-personal trust and then expanding on that by committing to trust embedding social practices (TESPs) which enrich the intra-congregational trust so that both collaboration and cooperation become the norm. By identifying TESPs for each of the five phases of the boundary spanning process, this project points congregational leaders towards replicable practices which have been shown to bear inter-congregational trust forming fruit.

Along these lines, this project is particularly significant for Free Church evangelicals because of the weakness that congregations formed within this tradition have of letting sectarianism stunt their imaginations for the importance and possibilities of Church unity. But also, because of the potential strength that congregations within this tradition have to initiate deeper unity in their local context. Free Church evangelicals who recognize the importance of such unity have the potential to be keen agents of local Church reconciliation. Their natural focus on congregational reality opens a vast array of grassroots possibilities which are often hidden to those from traditions which emphasize higher-level interactions between denominational leaders.

Second this dissertation has significance for ecumenical studies. As important as the work of the ecumenical movement in pursuing Church reconciliation over the past century has been, the lack of implementation at the local level and the lack of research where such initiatives have happened has been and continues to be a weakness. Significant voices in the ecumenical movement have argued for the importance of working out in local settings the implications of the higher-level work done between traditions, but this has not been a priority that has been regularly engaged.¹ This project contributes to ecumenical studies by recognizing the importance of pursuing Church unity and establishing a theory of how such unity grows between a group of congregations in a city context. The fact that most of the congregations involved do not come from traditions which have been active in the ecumenical movement argues that the models and energy needed to pursue local unity cannot be expected to simply trickle down from the higher-level work done by groups like the World Council of Churches but needs to be encouraged and resourced separately. There are important theological and process resources which the ecumenical movement has to offer to groups of congregations looking to enrich the unity in their context, but distinct models for pursuing local unity such as what is put forth in this project are needed as well.²

A third area this dissertation project contributes to is the discipline of Practical Theology. Given the integral role which trust plays in human relations, a number of academic disciplines have developed robust bodies of literature which postulate theories

¹ See Swamy, "Local Ecumenical Efforts," 142–44; Guder, *Called to Witness*, 196; and Lindbeck, "Confession," 496.

² Receptive Ecumenism (see Martin, *Receptive Ecumenism*) and the Global Christian Forum (see Granberg-Michaelson, *From Times Square*) are two resources flowing from the broader ecumenical movement which have significant promise for the work being done at the local level.

of what trust is and how it works, and then put forward further literature devoted to researching the validity of such theories. It is odd then that given the importance of trust to the life of faith there is very little work that has been done to understand the theological significance of trust, consider the role it plays in how congregations function, or explore how it gets lived out in personal practice. This dissertation project takes an initial step in that direction by postulating that trust is a lived expression of Church unity and exploring how such trust develops at the inter-personal and inter-congregational levels.

Finally, this dissertation project has significance for the academic discipline of organizational trust studies. Through the use of critical realist grounded theory this project identified a five-phase process by which inter-personal trust gets transformed into inter-organizational trust and embedded in organizational culture through the work of representative leaders who function as boundary spanners between organizations. It recognizes that congregations are a special type of organization and while not all aspects of how congregations function are generalizable to organizations, there is significant overlap. The five-phase boundary spanning process which this project identifies connects to the growing body of work which recognizes the significance that boundary spanning has for how trust develops between organizations.³

Limitations of this Project

There are a number of limitations to this project which point in the direction of needed further research. The first of these limitations is that while this project recognizes the

³ See Kroeger, "Trusting Organizations," and Williams, *Perspectives on Boundary Spanning*.

significance of intra-congregational trust formation in the process of inter-congregational trust development, it never explores how such intra-congregational trust develops. For phases three and four of the boundary spanning process to be fruitfully engaged, the boundary spanners must be sufficiently trusted within their congregation for the congregation to follow their lead in relating to another congregation. If the boundary spanner is not adequately trusted, then their attempts to build the congregations trust for another congregation will prove impotent or even counter-productive.

It seems likely that the importance of boundary spanners and the process by which they transform inter-personal trust into collective trust will apply within congregations just as it does between them. It would make sense that there are leaders who function representatively for the various clusters of people who make up a congregation and that there would be practices these leaders can engage which would foster intra-congregational trust. Research is needed however, to explore to what extent these processes run parallel and what unique dynamics are at work in an intra-congregational context which are different from an inter-congregational one.

A second limitation of this research project is that it does not explore ways to assess how healthy and robust inter-congregational trust in fact is in a congregational setting. This limits the usefulness of the process it lays out and the practices it identifies as significant because there is not an adequate way to recognize to what extent inter-congregational trust is broadening and deepening. A phenomenological study of the nature of inter-congregational trust would be helpful for learning to better assess the quality of the inter-congregational trust that is developing. It would provide a way for

identifying which behaviors and attitudes point to the presence of inter-congregational trust.

A third limitation is the lack of attention given to the process of how network trust forms. While it was recognized that network participation for how trust between congregations forms is significant and it was postulated that by building trust between congregations network trust is enhanced, which practices strengthen the development of network trust were not looked at specifically. It is suspected that there are intra-congregational practices similar to those identified in the third phase of Inter-Congregational Trust Building which are significant. It is also suspected that there are network participation practices like those identified in the fourth and fifth phases which would build the trust of a congregation for the broader network. The contention is that inter-congregational trust and network trust work in tandem, building off each other, but they are not inter-changeable and so congregations have to pay attention to and develop both.

Perhaps the most significant limitation of this project is that it only engages with dominant culture congregations and their leaders. This is in large part because the TrueCity network has failed to consistently connect with non-dominant culture ethnic congregations. This is a serious weakness which continues to diminish the impact this network has on its city Church context. This lack of inter-cultural interaction keeps TrueCity from robustly demonstrating the reality of catholicity in a way consistent with what is laid out in this project.⁴ The TrueCity network has at points been able to connect with congregations primarily made up of non-dominant culture ethnicities but

⁴ Branson and Martinez, *Churches, Cultures, and Leadership*, chapter 3, para. 25 loc 918–920.

has never successfully sustained such engagement. Making space for the leaders of these congregations has not been a high enough priority to overcome the challenge of involving them in the network. The concerns and priorities of such congregations are different, and the focus of collaboration has never sufficiently included their interests in ways that would encourage their participation. This is a significant frontier for the process of Church reconciliation and needs courageous leaders to commit to relating across the divides that currently exist. Further research is needed on how missional collaboration could be inclusive of more diverse interests so that trust can form across the current divides.

A related limitation is that this project primarily focuses on the experience of a group of congregations in one city in southern-Ontario, Canada. Of the 22 people interviewed for this project, 19 were from Hamilton and involved in the TrueCity network. The input from the 3 people interviewed who are from other city contexts by and large matched up with the input of those from Hamilton with regards to the boundary spanning process and the TESP's identified for each phase. More research in other contexts would be needed, however, to understand what is unique to Hamilton and what is more generalizable to other contexts.

A fifth limitation is that only leaders who function as boundary spanners for the congregations they are a part of were interviewed. This worked well for being able to identify the process by which inter-personal trust formed for these boundary spanners, and the practices they engaged in which embedded this trust into their congregational settings. To understand better however, which practices are most effective for embedding trust in congregations, it would be helpful to interview other members of

congregations who do not function as boundary spanners. To the extent that it could be identified where they have come to experience inter-congregational trust, the practices which proved most effective in growing that experience could be helpfully explored.

A sixth limitation of this project is that the research did not explore how the power dynamics at work between the church leaders impacted the development of interpersonal trust. The size and social location of a congregation effects its perceived status giving some pastors and congregations more social power than others. It would be expected that for inter-personal trust to form amid power differences, the leader with more power would need to find ways to relate on more equal terms despite the advantages their power gives them. Similarly, it would be expected that larger congregations would need to intentionally find ways to value smaller congregations for inter-congregational trust to develop. It was beyond the scope of this project to explore these, and other realities related to power differences and the impact these would have on the formation of inter-personal and inter-congregational trust. Exploring this reality more specifically would likely lead to the identification of other pastoral and congregational practices which would strengthen the various phases of the boundary spanning process.

An additional limitation is that the research done for this project was done primarily with Free Church evangelicals who come from a tradition which has a natural suspicion of ecumenism. While those interviewed all believed in the importance of Church unity and have lived out practices which show they value pursuing it, it was difficult to tell where and how the sectarianism which characterizes this tradition impacted their postures. A few of those interviewed are part of traditions which have

participated in global ecumenism more fully. Questions were not asked which sought to distinguish how the attitudes these people have might be different because of their tradition's posture towards ecumenism. It would be valuable to interview more people from the Church traditions which value ecumenism in order to see if their traditions' involvement translates into a deeper commitment to pursuing unity in the local context or not.

An eighth limitation is that the theological implications for this dissertation project were done primarily in conversation with missional and Free Church evangelical writers. The work of theologians participating in ecumenical dialogue coming from Main-line Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox traditions have much to contribute which might add greater breadth and depth to the understanding of how to more fruitfully enrich the trust between congregations in a local setting.

One final limitation to recognize is that the trust research for this project was done primarily in conversation with input from the Organizational Development discipline. There are other disciplines which might have contributed other fruitful input. The streams of trust research in psychology, social-psychology, sociology, and anthropology look at trust through alternative lenses which likely would have added additional insights and might have deepened and extended the theoretical work done.

Concluding Thoughts

There is a fascinatingly paradoxical set of verses in the gospel of Luke that lay out the challenges inherent in pursuing Church reconciliation. In Luke 9:49–50 we read how John came to Jesus concerned about a man who was driving out demons in Jesus' name

because he was not one of the disciples. Jesus' reply is, "Do not stop him for whoever is not against you is for you." In Luke 11:23 in response to opponents who were claiming that it was Beelzebub who was the source of Jesus' power to drive out demons, Jesus proclaims, "He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me, scatters." While on the surface it seems Jesus is contradicting himself, the difference between these proclamations turns on how those being referenced relate to Jesus. In 9:50 the man is working in Jesus' name. He is not among the disciples, but he is not against them. The proclamation in 11:23 concerns those who oppose Jesus himself, who claim he is in league with Satan. These sayings speak directly to the posture needing to be cultivated in relation to congregations from other traditions in order for Church reconciliation to be pursued. It all turns on how people relate to Jesus. Those who are doing good in Jesus' name are to be considered allies. They are brothers and sisters even if they are sheep from another sheep pen (John 10:16). If they are opposed, the risk is working against Jesus, of being those who are scattering. This is a danger that evangelicals have not taken seriously enough. It has led to an underdeveloped theology of Church unity.

This dissertation has pointed a way forward toward a more robust theology of Church reconciliation which seeks to see congregations embrace and develop deeper trust with an ever-growing number of congregations in a local context who have centered Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. A crucial piece of this is for congregational leaders who function representatively to span the boundaries between congregations by engaging in practices which build inter-personal trust with other boundary spanners, develop intra-congregational trust for other congregations, and then facilitate inter-

congregational collaboration and cooperation. It is contended that to faithfully respond to God's invitation to join him in his mission of reconciling all things, it requires people to repent of divisiveness and engage in such practices which embed trust for other congregations into congregational cultures. To move in this direction, there is a need to repent of the sectarianism which has warped congregational practices and move to a posture of hospitality, stretching to embrace all who have life in Christ despite our differences.

APPENDIX: CODE MAPS

The following figures are maps of the codes that were developed in analyzing the research for this project.

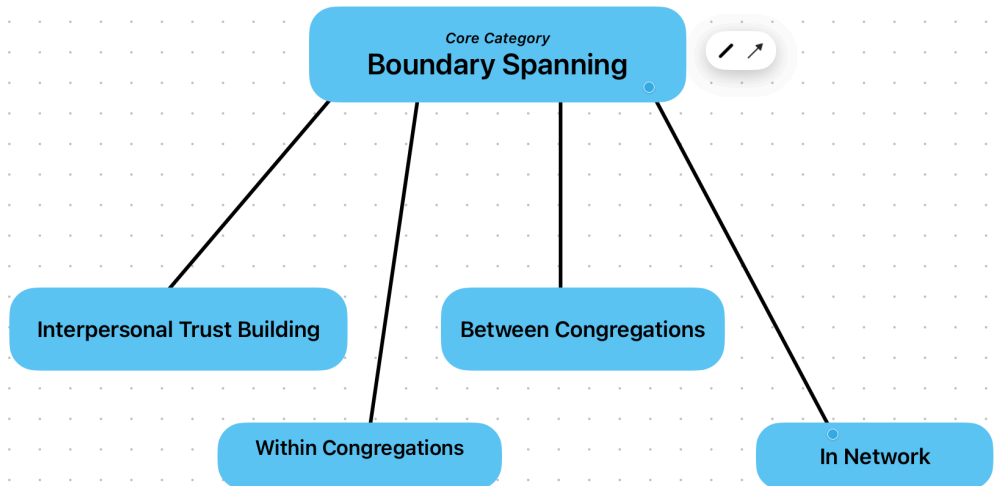


Figure 1—Core Category and Main Sub-categories

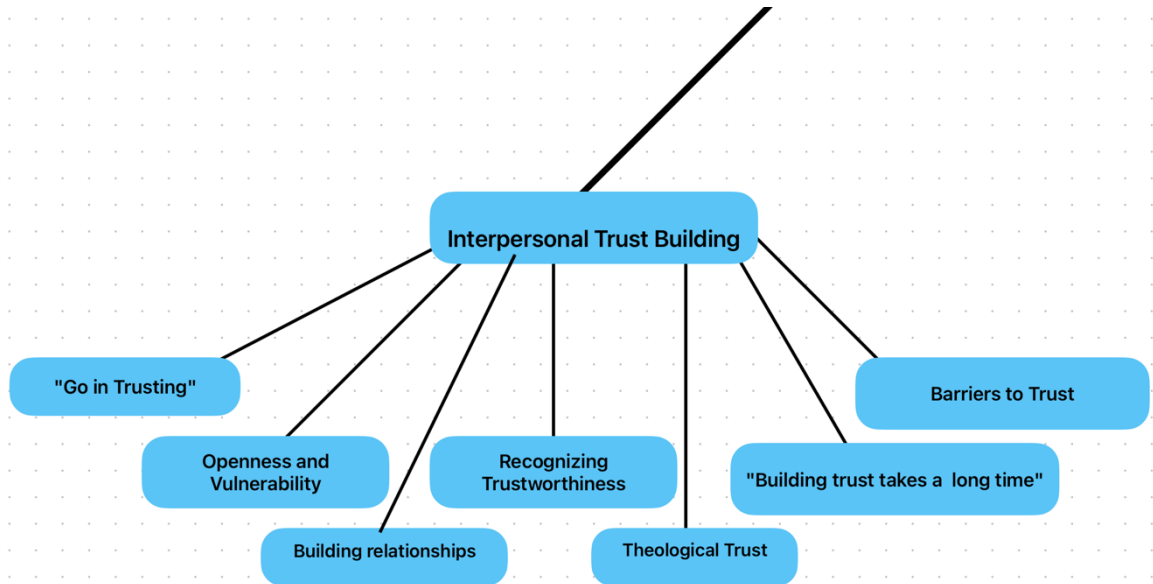


Figure 2—Interpersonal Trust Codes

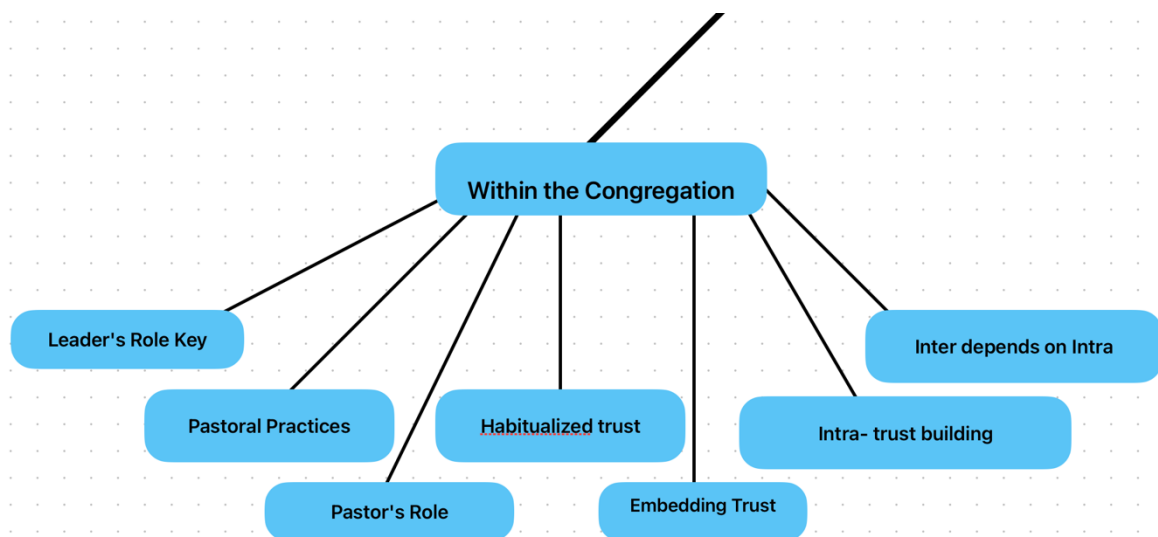


Figure 3—Within the Congregation Codes

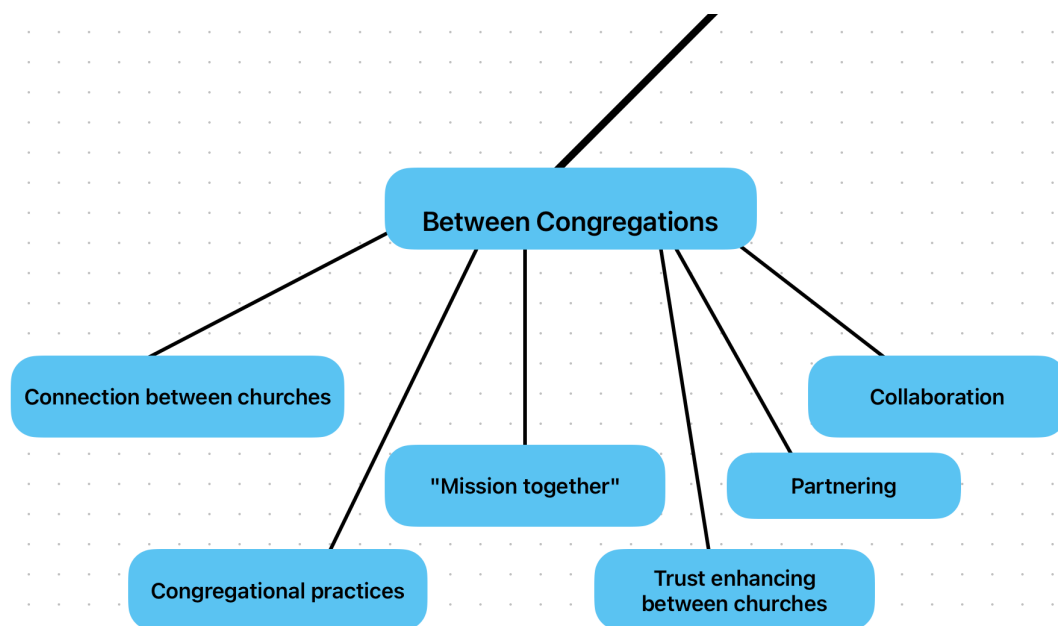


Figure 4—Between Congregation Codes

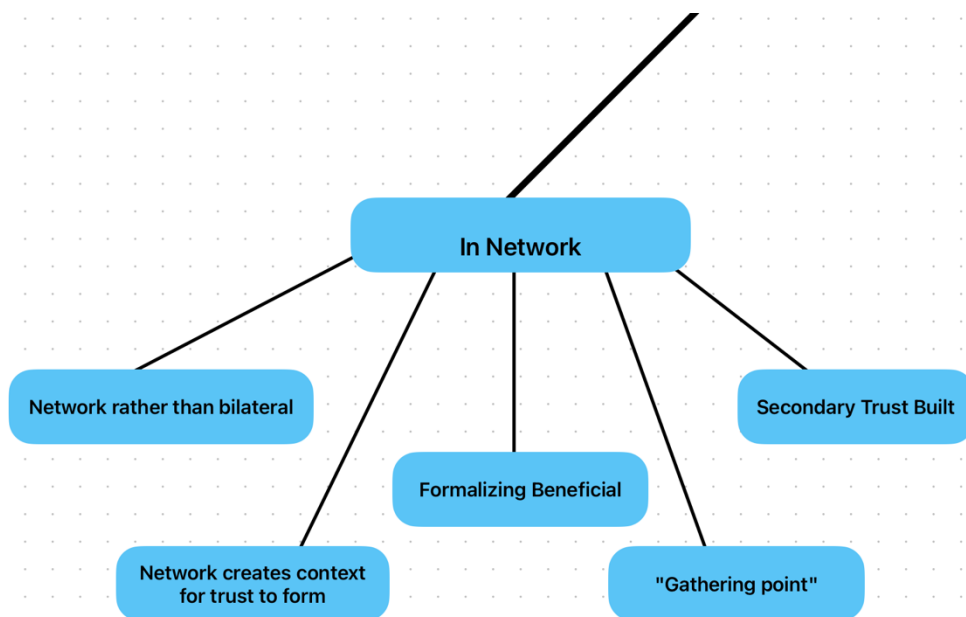


Figure 5—In Network Codes

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