

## An introduction to **THE SHAPE OF LEADERSHIP WITH A LOCAL THEOLOGIAN: Discerning the Unknown Journey Ahead Through Praxis Groups.**

The new and emerging context facing the church in the Modern West, particularly in the United States, requires a different approach to leadership. Most leaders in the western culture, including leaders of the Christian church, have been trained within systems and institutions built upon the assumed strengths of modern Enlightenment. We have been trained to manage and control at least a portion of society by providing solutions to problems, both real and perceived, to achieve “success” towards creating what is prescribed to be our preferred future. Gerald Hiestand and Todd Wilson in their book *The Pastor Theologian* describe what they call a “theological anemia” of modern pastors who are seen as middle-management brokers of theological truths set by those in the academy.<sup>1</sup> This systematically ordered scientific worldview, emphasizing knowledge of facts and reason, has become part of our “social imaginary”<sup>2</sup> – part of the social and theological air we breathe.

We have taken for granted and assumed as fact many values of the Enlightenment which serve as the warp of our social fabric. Some of these values are being revealed to have self-destructive flaws, resulting in an unravelling of our society. One critical flaw specifically pertinent to the Christian church is how the social imaginary of the modern West has buffered and isolated us from the primacy of God’s agency; we do not have the habits of mind or conversation necessary to see God as agent in the common, daily experiences of life. For the past few decades church leaders have attempted to provide solutions to “fix” these increasingly palpable and yet still superficial flaws, unwittingly blind to the inherent consequences of being shaped by society with a primary focus on human agency. More recently, there are a growing number of theologians who are calling for a different approach to Christian leadership. Namely, an approach that envisions a leader as one who, rather than providing answers and producing quantifiable results, can cultivate spaces in which people attend to God as the primary agent and facilitate shared discernment of ways in which to participate in what God is already doing. Several leading thinkers have described the leaders in this new approach as “local theologians.”

A local theologian must cultivate relationships to form a bridge of discernment between the local and global witnesses of the Gospel. Schreiter describes a local theologian as a resource “helping the community to clarify its own experience and to relate it to the experience of other communities past and present” forming “the bonds of mutual accountability between local and world church.”<sup>3</sup> This is done, in part, by constructing what Clemens Sedmak in his book *Doing Local Theology* calls “little theologies” which are “small contributions that serve a local community, on a certain occasion... to help people understand their lives against the background of the gospel... [and are] a counterbalance to the big theological systems that have dominated the history of theology.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Hiestand, Gerald, and Todd Wilson. *The Pastor Theologian: Resurrecting an Ancient Vision*. Zondervan, 2015, 60-61.

<sup>2</sup> The “social imaginary” is the implicit understandings out of which people make sense of their world; the background assumptions that form and shape the way they act. See Rowe, *World Upside Down*, pp 142-145 for a more detailed explanation of Charles Taylor’s notion of “social imaginary” used here.

<sup>3</sup> Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, 21.

<sup>4</sup> Sedmak, Clemens. *Doing Local Theology: A Guide for Artisans of a New Humanity*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002, 121-125.