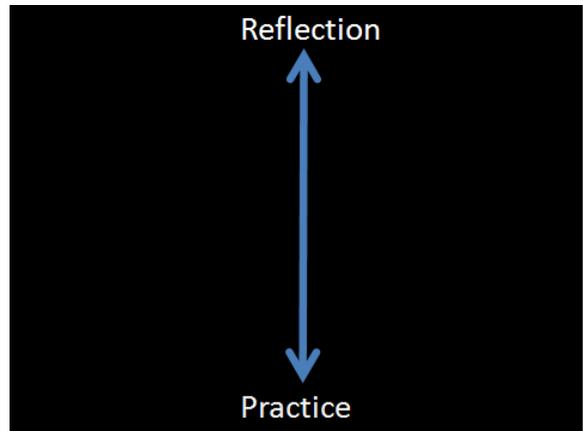


Practical Theology in Church and Society

By Joseph E. Bush Jr. ©2012

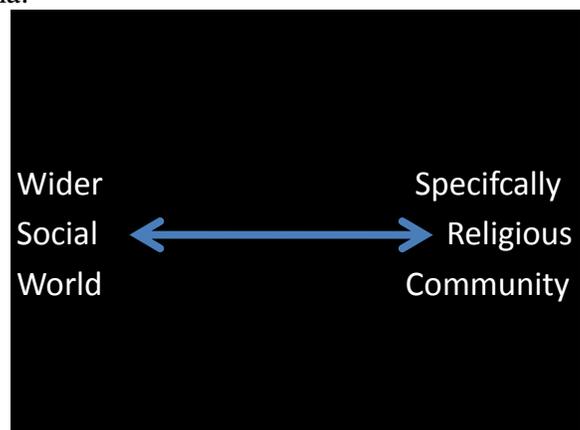
All of the approaches to theological reflection discussed above are examples of “practical theology” in that they all represent ways to think faithfully about practice of ministry. We can present this as a simple one-dimensional schema:



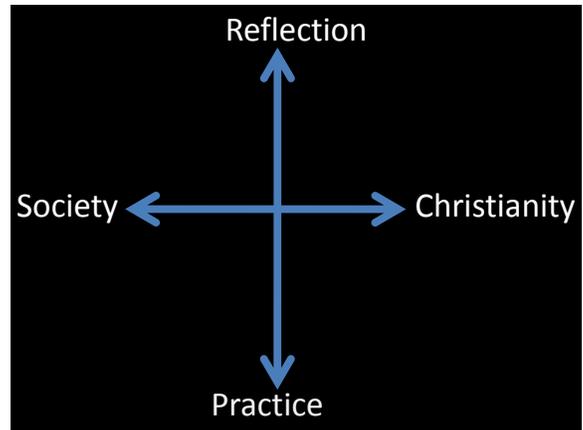
As we recognize that all ministry occurs within community, moreover, our perspective broadens to incorporate our widening community of concern.

Especially with regard to explicitly **theological** reflection on practice, we have to acknowledge that theology as “God-talk” occurs within particular communities of **faith** and that it is shaped in relationship to the **practices** of these communities of faith.

Our communities of faith, in turn, relate to a wider society and a wider world with many diverse people organized in many diverse ways. These people may or may not share our faith commitments and religious assumptions. Conversely, an explicitly religious community may or may not share many of the political commitments and social values common in the wider society. The question is always to be asked, though: in what ways does our religious community relate to the wider social world of which we are a part? This question presents another dialectical dimension into our schema:



In shorthand, we sometimes refer to this question as the relationship between religion and society or between the church and the “world.” This is not to imply an absolute distinction between the two. Far from it! Rather, we are simply positing the question of how the two might be related at any given time and in any given place. So, placing these two directions of inquiry together, our schema becomes multi-dimensional, e.g. for Christian communities:



With this conceptualization, reflection on practice is thoroughly social. For the student-intern, it is no longer simply “thinking about what I am doing in light of what I believe” or “thinking about what I believe in light of what I am doing.” Rather, it is to think about how *we* as a people of faith are organizing ourselves to relate to the rest of society in ministry or witness. It is to ask, as well, how our very religious beliefs are shaped by and give shape to ideas and ideologies circulating in our larger society.

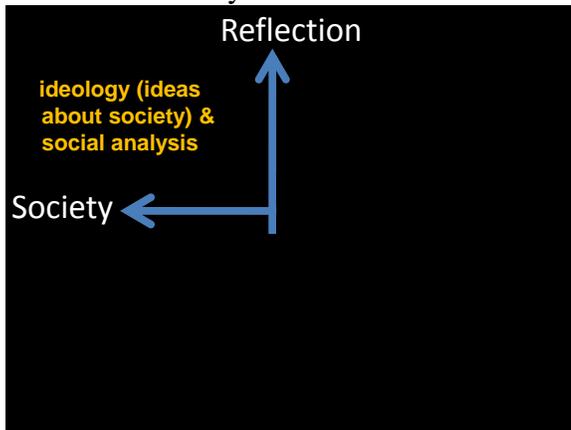
Each quadrant represents a different aspect of this relationship. If we begin in the lower left quadrant, this simply represents our actual life together in society. This is our social praxis, our social location—who we are as social beings economically and politically. This quadrant represents the myriad social forces that make us who we are. When we enter a community, we find people already there, already organized. We find institutions already at work. To begin in this quadrant is to insert ourselves into a community; it is to enter into solidarity with the people already living there. It is to start to live together and to struggle together within the same set of social conditions. These conditions both unite and divide us. These realities of life together in society are represented by this first lower, left quadrant.



To begin theological reflection here, is simply to enter a community. It is not to enter a congregation alone, but to recognize that the congregation itself is nested within a larger community and shaped by

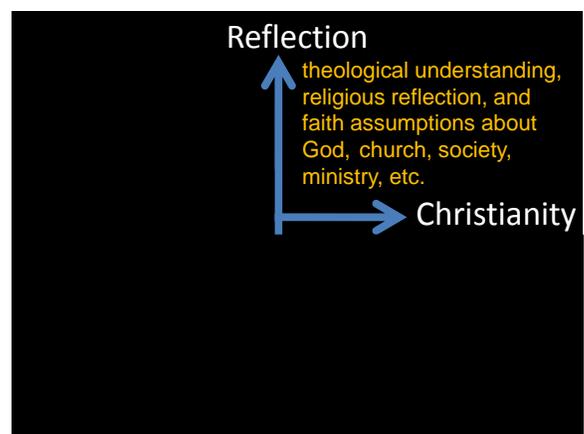
surrounding social forces. Student-interns, especially those using the textbook by Dudley, are asked to step into their communities and discover the people and institutions already there.

The upper, left quadrant is what we *think* about life together in society. These thoughts about our social praxis can be either at the level of assumption or deliberation. When we think deliberately and reflectively about our social praxis, we engage in social and cultural analysis. But there are many ideologies as well as analyses competing for people's attention, often assumed—all of them offering portrayals, models, explanations or even justifications of the social forces at work in the social world. To reflect at this level is to take seriously our lived



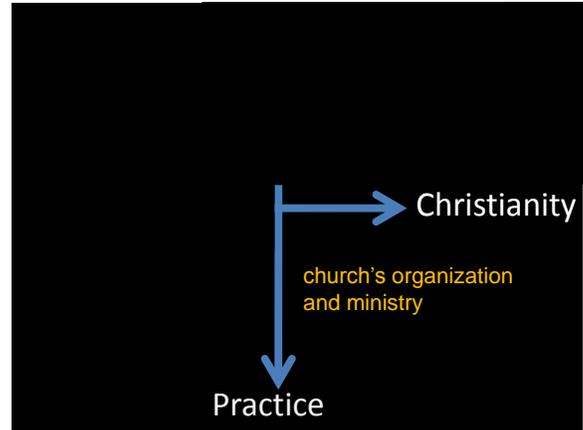
realities in community. We dig deeper to discover political power, economic forces, cultural patterns, institutional arrangements, etc. Student-interns, especially those using the textbook by Dudley, are asked to identify and map these social forces in the social communities surrounding their places of ministry. They give attention to community problems and social struggles, on the one hand, and to community assets and social resources on the other hand. They identify both formal structures of political and economic power and grassroots patterns of leadership and authority.

As a particular people of faith, moreover, how do our beliefs and assumptions reflect other important patterns of thought and ideologies in our shared social world? How can our theological reflection be informed more deliberately by our own social analysis? How might our religious thinking enrich the larger shared world of meaning in our common culture? These are questions that move us into the upper, right quadrant.



Our explicitly theological reflection points our attention toward God and to divine realities. But, at the same time, we continue to attend both to our shared world of meaning in society (represented by the upper

left quadrant) and to our own practices in ministry as people of faith (represented by the lower right quadrant). By engaging in explicit theological reflection, we hope to unite the two more deliberately—to relate our own religious practice faithfully and meaningfully within a larger world of social meaning and cultural understanding. For student-interns, the book *Shared Wisdom* is an especially helpful resource for accessing our explicitly theological resources, religious traditions, and spiritual metaphors in reflecting on practice.



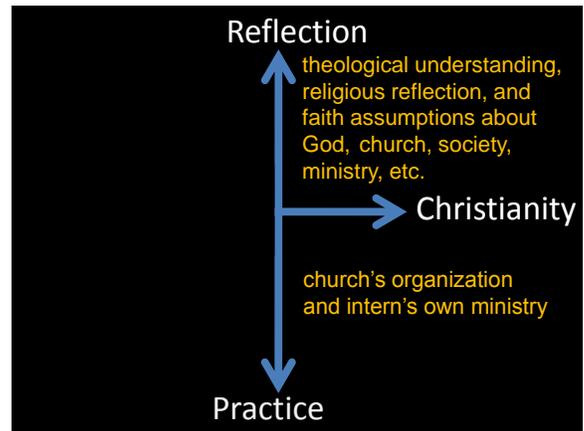
The lower right quadrant represents our particular praxis as Christians organized in whatever form. Our praxis as Christians is the concrete reality of our life together in this world. It includes the institutional and social form of our organization, the actual practices of ministry by both clergy and laity in church and society, and the many ways in which we may seek to serve our neighbors in the wider society--whether through service, evangelism, advocacy or social action. Our praxis as Christians also includes ways in which we might want to distinguish ourselves or to separate from the larger society, and it includes ways in which we might cooperate with—or even be co-opted by—others in society, such as in service of war or wealth. It represents whatever we do as Christians and however we are organized. We hope that our ministry, our practice, as Christians (represented by lower right quadrant) will be consistent both with our most faithful theological understandings (represented by the upper right quadrant) and with our most loving and just engagement in society (represented by the lower left quadrant).

Student-interns as well as their learning partners are challenged to make these connections. We are all engaged in the practice of ministry. Theological reflection on this ministry is “practical theology.” The ministry itself provides the primary data for theological reflection. This is why an internship in ministry is necessary for these students.

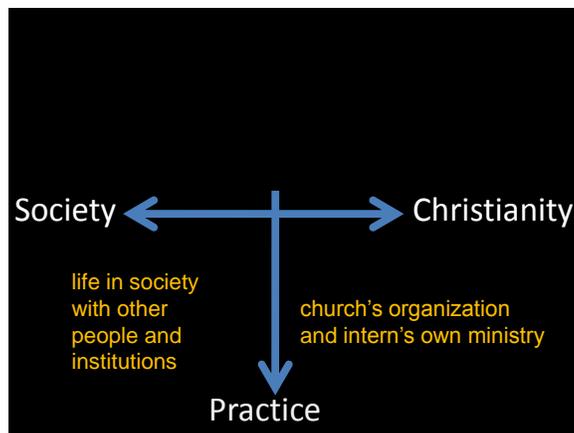
Moreover, our ministry occurs in cooperation and in concert with each other. We work together in ministry within particular contexts of service. Our learning partners are our fellow laborers. This is why student interns have clergy and lay learning partners—not just to work together, but to reflect together about the nature of our work as ministry in service of both God and neighbor. We reflect together in order to make these connections more visible, even as we work together to make our ministry more effective. We are aiming to be faithful in both our practice and our reflection.

For most student interns, this fourth quadrant on the lower right is actually their beginning—their point of departure. They begin the process by entering a place of ministry and by engaging in that ministry. This point of entry—actual engagement in ministry--provides an opportunity for an intern to do socially relevant ministry and to do faithful theological reflection. But it also presents challenges.

One challenge is simply to engage theology deliberately and reflectively in the practice of ministry. Most of the resources for theological reflection provided to student-interns seek to help them to make the connections between their own ministry and the resources of the faith. This challenge is all on the right side of our grid—that concerning religious reflection on religious service and involvement in church practices. How does an intern reflect theologically on her or his own experience of ministry on a largely religious context?



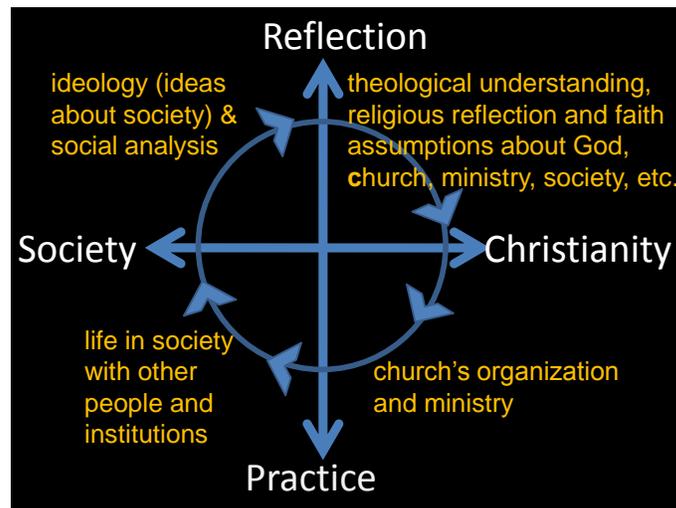
Another challenge is to steer our own ministry or the religious organization's practice into relevant connection with its surrounding community and with the larger society. How does our practice as Christians actually relate to the realities that our neighbors face? This challenge is all on the lower half of the grid—that concerning ministry as concrete engagement with others in society.



Student-interns utilizing the textbook by Dudley are intentionally seeking to address this challenge. They are involved in exercises that move their ministry in the direction of the surrounding community.

A compound challenge is presented, though, as we seek to be engaged in each of the four quadrants that we have described—to be engaged both practically and reflectively in both church and society. We can become so busy in community ministry, that it takes energy to move into a reflective mode and to access the resources of our faith. Conversely, we can become so occupied and even preoccupied with our religious context—both our practices of ministry and our theological reflection on ministry—that we find ourselves (and find our congregations!) disengaged from the social life and the social problems surrounding us.

Several methods of theological reflection are designed to cycle us through each of these quadrants successively. These can be grouped into families, but they all tend to have in common this circular movement through these four quadrants.



The liberationist hermeneutical circle, the pastoral cycle, contextual theologies, and methods of practical theology all tend to:

- (a) begin with experience in society,
- (b) move to deepen our critical understanding of our social experience,
- (c) engage in explicitly theological reflection on this deepening understanding,
- (d) inform the church's ministerial practice, and
- (e) hopefully move that ministerial practice toward effective engagement in society.

The individual course syllabi for these internships contain bibliographies with methodological variations by particular theologians as recommended in each of these courses. This circular movement, though, is very similar for most of them. This method can be used descriptively, reflexively or constructively.

A **descriptive** use of this method allows us to analyze a ministerial practice or a theological statement contextually. For any given ministerial practice or for any given theological statement, a series of four questions (or four groups of questions) can be asked:

1. What is the social location of the practice of ministry, of the practitioner, of the theological utterance, or of the speaker? How might this social location or social context have shaped the practice of ministry or of the expression of theology?
2. How might we understand this social context better? What social forces are at work? What divides or unites people in this social context? What are their struggles? What are their victories? How do they understand their own social situation? How, then, does this practice of ministry or this expression of theology reflect these social conditions, address these social issues, or confront these social dynamics?

3. What are the explicitly theological resources being accessed in this practice of ministry or expression of theology? What religious symbols are employed? What aspects of the tradition are highlighted? What parts of Scripture are read? Conversely, what is omitted? How do these theological ideas reflect or confront (or reflect AND confront) ideologies and values within the wider social context?

4. How is this expression of theology reflected in practices of ministry or, conversely, how is this practice of ministry indicative of a particular theological perspective? Is this practice of ministry engaging mostly church people, or does it reach into the surrounding community? How does this practice of ministry continue a tradition? How does it alter tradition? How does this practice of ministry reflect social realities? How is it hoped to transform social realities?

A **reflexive** use of this method simply asks these questions about oneself in ministry. Analyzing one's own ministry or one's own expression of theology, ask the same or similar questions. This can be done alone or in a community of learning or a community of practice. The learning partnership is intended to be such a community—where both student-intern and pastor-mentor can be in conversation together about their respective practices of ministry and about their joint ministry together. The colloquy organized by the seminary is also intended to be such a community, allowing student interns in a variety of contexts to explore these questions together about their respective ministries.

A **constructive** use of this method seeks to articulate a theology that is relevant to our practice in church or society, or it attempts to develop ministerial practice in a direction that is more socially relevant or theologically informed. A constructive use of this method might begin in any of the four quadrants and explore the connections with the adjacent quadrants. But very frequently, one is advised to begin with the social situation itself which is represented in the lower left quadrant. This point of entry allows one to begin to take the perspective of people in the community.

1. How do we enter a new community, or how do we enter into solidarity with the marginalized in a community, or how do we take our own social context or social location seriously? These are questions that simply situate ourselves initially within a social context.

2. From there we can begin to analyze the social forces at work in this social context—whether economic, political, cultural, ideological or related to family structure. We can explore patterns of oppression such as racism, classism and sexism. We can examine historical patterns that have shaped this community, such as slavery or colonization or evangelization or capital investment or warfare or immigration or globalization. We look for connections between these social forces. This is the intellectual work represented in the upper left quadrant; we reflect deliberately on the dynamics of our social praxis.

3. Explicit theological reflection, then, attempts to make connections between the faith—its sources and symbols, its historical traditions and its contemporary breadth. What might our theological heritage have to say to our social situation as we have analyzed it? Correlatively, what challenges or questions or insights does our social analysis present to our theological perspective? Sometimes our point of access from the social to the theological is a quandary; sometimes it is an insight.

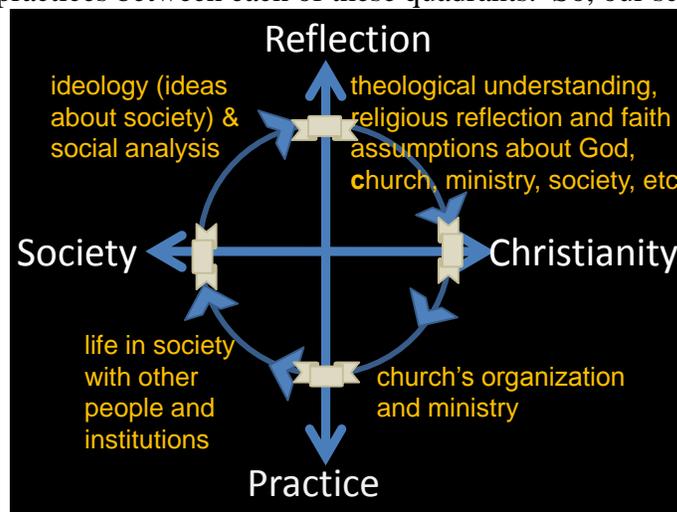
4. Finally, then, how does our theological exploration in light of our social analysis move us in thinking about ministry? How might we need to change or persevere? How might we need to sever ties or build alliances? How might we need to deepen our own spiritual practices or expand our social outreach? How might the laity be involved as well as the clergy, or how might the

community be involved as well as the congregation? And, indeed, how do we expect or hope this emerging ministry to affect or even to transform the real lives of neighbors in shared community?

As student-interns embrace this method and begin to apply it constructively, however, they frequently encounter a divide rather than a connection between each of these quadrants. No one set of questions seems to lead to the next set of questions. There is no logic of necessity between one set and the next. The movement from one set of questions to the next--or between one quadrant and the next—requires intuitive jumps or imaginative associations as much as logical connection.

There is a creativity in theological reflection made possible by openness as well as analysis. Prayer can help open us to these creative possibilities. So can play. So can conversation. This is where the regular meetings of the learning partnership can be of great help. In prayerful conversation together, we can reflect on the possible connections between our understanding of our social context and our reflection on practicing ministry. This is fertile ground for creative and constructive practical theology.

Methodologically, we focus on each set of questions as represented by the respective quadrants. But then we also need to attend to the possible connections between each set of questions. What theological ideas make connection with cultural thinking? What theological ideas might inform new ministerial practices? What congregational practices might connect with social movements for change? We need to look for bridge notions and bridge practices between each of these quadrants. So, our schema now looks like this:



This schematic grid can be presented on a worksheet. A student-intern and his or her learning partners can then record notes as they explore together questions related to each of the quadrants. As they note possible connections, though, it helps to draw a line to the bridge. What is connecting with what? Is, for instance, a love for liberty in the surrounding society's political ideology providing an associative bridge to a Pauline understanding of freedom from the law? The association might indicate an area for further critical attention. An immediate identification between the two should be resisted, but the connection between them explored and perhaps either deepened or delimited. In the same way, each of the bridges can be built by attending to the ideas and the practices that have the potential to connect.