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Constructing a Theological Framework That Revitalizes the Missional Nature of Churches of Christ in South Australia

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ABSTRACT

This thesis addresses the need for a theological framework that revitalizes the missional nature of Churches of Christ in South Australia. The problem identified within this ministry context was a lack of clear theological principles that informed a common understanding of identity for missional engagement. The purpose of the project was to create a study guide that informs common theological commitments and grounds congregations for missional vitality. A research and development team made up of seven Church of Christ ministers from different backgrounds was assembled to design a curriculum that addressed the problem. Through eight two-hour sessions over four months in the first half of 2022, the team discussed a theological framework that could revitalize mission. This was informed by a Trinitarian theological rationale introduced as *perichoresis*. The conceptual framework for discussions included (1) the historical and theological foundations of Churches of Christ, (2) a Trinitarian doctrine of God presented as *perichoresis*, (3) contemporary congregational practices, and (4) a theological proposal for re-imagining mission. The team developed a study guide that promotes a dynamic theological framework for practicing theology and revitalizing the missional nature of the church. The artifact, *Movement & Identity: Participating in the Life of God's Mission*, was evaluated by the team and members of Church of Christ congregations in South Australia. The curriculum is designed to assist participants with practical theological interpretation through (1) discovering new ideas about God in the context of Churches of Christ traditions, (2) engaging with contextual theology in community, (3) participating

in God's mission, and (4) reflecting on how God's agency transforms the church. The development of the study guide will stimulate a practical theological framework that promotes dynamic theological dialogue and missional vitality for Churches of Christ in South Australia.

Constructing a Theological Framework That Revitalizes the Missional Nature of
Churches of Christ in South Australia

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Graduate School of Theology

Abilene Christian University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Ministry

By

Mark Daniel Riessen

May 2023

This thesis, directed and approved by the committee for the thesis candidate Mark Riessen, has been accepted by the Office of Graduate Programs of Abilene Christian University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

Doctor of Ministry



Assistant Provost for Residential Graduate Programs

Date

January 9, 2023

Thesis Committee



Dr. Carson Reed, Chair



Dr. Jeff Childers



Wes Crawford (Jan 9, 2023 17:07 CST)

Dr. Wes Crawford

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To my wife, Verity, for her love, patience, and support. The challenges of my ministry context along with study has required her endurance and understanding. Thank you for being a sounding board for my theories and ideas while attending to your own ministry and theological studies.

To my three children, Daniel, Ayla, and Amber, who patiently allowed me the space to write. My hope is that one day the legacy of this project will help draw you into a deep and rich discipleship journey as you follow Jesus.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am incredibly grateful to the State Board of Churches of Christ in South Australia for their investment in me and support for this study. I could not have attended to this project without the support of the State Board and state ministry team who have helped allocate time for me to study and research this ministry context.

I am also indebted to the seven participants of the research and development team. Without your involvement, this project would not have succeeded. Thank you for your sacrifice, attendance, willingness to contribute, and posture for learning. The time we spent together was deeply meaningful for me, and you have given me hope for the future of our movement. Thank you also to my field notetaker, Kate Spencer.

Thank you to the members of Churches of Christ congregations who evaluated the study guide. Your feedback and contribution to this project were more meaningful than you might realize.

Thank you to my thesis editors, Kayla Hewitt and Lyndall Simpson-Smith. Your feedback and guidance has been very helpful.

Thank you to my advisors, Dr. Carson Reed and Dr. Jeff Childers, for your honesty and diligence in guiding me through this project. Your wisdom and experience have been invaluable, and I am grateful for your interest.

I am indebted to those in my Doctor of Ministry cohort who became more than colleagues on a journey together; you have become friends. Thank you for your time through all the group messages, phone calls, emails, coffees, collaborations, sharing of

ideas, mutual support, and collective wisdom. I do not think I would have been able to get through this without you.

I need to thank my friends and family. Thank you to those who enquired about my project and endured the response. Thank you to those who offered me friendship, refuge, rest, and distraction. You helped sustain me and reminded me that it is important to take a break. Thank you to my parents and parents-in-law for the support you offered our family so I could work.

Finally, to Verity, your endurance through my many years of ministry and study has been outstanding and not taken for granted. Thank you so much for your love and support. I love you. To my children, Daniel, Ayla, and Amber, thank you for sharing me with this extra work and for your understanding when I needed to hide away from time to time. I am grateful for all the ways you have enabled me to attend to my work. I love you.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The legacy of the Stone-Campbell Movement in South Australia, known as Churches of Christ, is represented by forty-three autonomous congregations in a formal association called the Conference of Churches of Christ. The association exists as a cooperative network for strengthening the capacity of Churches of Christ for church planting, mission, evangelism, and compliance with government and community expectations. Part of the challenge for this non-creedal movement is to have a clear understanding of the theological principles that inform cooperative participation in God's mission. Questions are often raised about how Churches of Christ understands its identity and purpose without a guiding theological framework. The old catch cry of the movement, "no creed but Christ, no book but the Bible" has worn thin and does not help clarify the nature of Churches of Christ, its identity, and missional vocation in a context where diverse expressions of Christian faith are represented throughout congregations.

This project seeks to bring clarity to the conversation about the movement of Churches of Christ in South Australia, its core theological commitments, and how this informs the missional nature and activities of the movement. In order to address this project, a group of experienced Churches of Christ ministers were gathered to form a research and development team. This team developed a study guide to be used for assisting the congregations in their understanding of a theological framework that can revitalize the missional nature of Churches of Christ in South Australia.

Ministry Context Overview

Churches of Christ in South Australia has a proud and rich history as the first expression of the Stone-Campbell Movement in Australia. The Stone-Campbell tradition emboldened Adelaide-based pioneers for innovation and rapid growth. In describing this context, the historical literature will reveal that cooperative evangelistic efforts, church planting, and common principles were hallmarks of what shaped theological imagination and missional identity for Churches of Christ in South Australia. Towards the end of the twentieth century and the emergence of the twenty-first, this flailing movement has been rapidly reducing in membership and impact resulting in congregations closing and a movement struggling with its purpose and identity.

This project explores the historical, theological, and contextual analysis of Churches of Christ in South Australia, how its current leaders understand the heritage that shapes the identity of the movement, and whether there is a shared sense of the story of the Stone-Campbell tradition that still informs its identity and purpose. As the researcher for this project, I bring key insights as a current staff member of the Churches of Christ state leadership team. Having served in leadership roles within Churches of Christ congregations in South Australia and Victoria¹ for over twenty-five years, I have experienced and observed a great deal of the movement's current struggle. Serving in the role of Mission and Ministry Director since 2013 has enabled me to develop a depth of insight and breadth of experience to inform this project.

1. I spent eight years in congregational ministry in Victoria before returning to a lead ministry role for a congregation in South Australia.

Much of the contemporary analysis and insights into this ministry context are drawn from my leadership experience over twenty-five years. The beginning of the twenty-first century is when the last resurgence of the movement to work cooperatively with innovative missional strategies and the intentional development of disciples occurred. However, the past twenty years have revealed a rapid loss of momentum and decline in membership across the state,² with seventeen congregations closing and only one new congregation planted and sustained.

I have observed tension in the movement over theological diversity, strengthening autonomy of congregations leading to more independence, loss of influential leaders, and loss of communication methods that center the movement in a shared story. This has resulted in a loss of understanding about the heritage that draws the churches together. In recent years, these tensions have created points of distraction, inhibiting the ability of the movement to participate in collaborative efforts to join God's mission in forming new faith communities and developing disciples of Christ who will continue the work of the movement.

A History of Cooperative Evangelistic Efforts

The establishment of Churches of Christ in South Australia is largely attributed to Thomas Magarey, an Irish immigrant who settled in Adelaide, South Australia during the early pioneering years of the colony in 1845.³ Having already been exposed to the Stone-Campbell Movement through a conversion experience in New Zealand, Magarey was

2. Figure 2 shows statistical data of the reported collective membership for churches within the association from 1980–2021. Between 2001 and 2021, the membership of Churches of Christ in South Australia has nearly halved.

3. D. Newell Williams, Douglas A. Foster, and Paul M. Blowers, eds., *The Stone-Campbell Movement: A Global History* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice, 2013), 109.

“the driving force” for introducing the movement in South Australia, establishing the first Church of Christ in Australia.⁴ His pioneering leadership was inspired by the writing and influence of Alexander Campbell. As early as 1847, Magarey was taken with Campbell’s writings on primitive Christianity⁵ and made a habit of regularly introducing people to Campbell by distributing copies of the *British Millennial Harbinger* among members of the congregation he was part of on Franklin Street, which would later become the first official Churches of Christ congregation.⁶ “Thomas possessed all that Alexander Campbell had ever written, from the first volume of the Christian Baptist to the last volume of the Millennial Harbinger.”⁷

Magarey had great enthusiasm and passion for assisting the emergence of new congregations that reflected Campbell’s theological and ecclesiological proposals. This included the establishment of the Hindmarsh Church of Christ on a property for which Magarey was one of the trustees.⁸ This was to be a non-denominational Christian chapel to accommodate the diversity and freedom of religious expression imbedded in the cultural fabric of this “free” settlement.⁹ As a successful businessman, local legislator,

4. Douglas A. Foster et al., eds., *Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement*, reprint ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 47, 564.

5. P. W. Verco, *Thomas and Elisabeth Magarey* (Adelaide, South Australia: LPH, 1985), 54.

6. Verco, *Thomas*, 150.

7. Verco, *Thomas*, 176.

8. Fellow trustee John Ridley proposed the building of a chapel on site according to his principle of “Religious Union.” Verco, *Thomas*, 64.

9. A document produced by the South Australian Heritage Council describes the cultural environment within which seeds of the Stone-Campbell Movement were able to take root. It confirms the establishment of the non-denominational chapel that Thomas Magarey and fellow trustees agreed to in 1846. “Summary of State Heritage Place,” https://data.environment.sa.gov.au/Content/Publications/26493_Summary.pdf

and church leader, Thomas Magarey had significant influence. By 1855, three Churches of Christ congregations were established in Adelaide.¹⁰

A collaborator in the work of establishing Churches of Christ in South Australia was Thomas Magarey's friend and colleague, Henry Hussey. Hussey was a keen student of Campbell's, and like Magarey, studied Campbell's writing on the subject of baptism extensively.¹¹ Leroy Garrett writes that Hussey was so influenced by the writings of Campbell that in 1854 he travelled eighty days from Adelaide to Bethany so that he might be baptized by "the Bishop."¹² This was a significant event for Hussey, and he reports talking at length with Campbell about the "foundation and facts" of Christianity.¹³ Peter Willis Verco reports that on the day of his return home, Hussey attended a meeting of the Hindmarsh Church of Christ and addressed the meeting.¹⁴

Following the arrival of British evangelist, H. S. Earl, and North American evangelists, T. J. Gore and G. L. Surber, in the 1860s,¹⁵ momentum for the movement increased with churches being established wherever the evangelists visited, mainly in

10. Magarey was not responsible for establishing all three congregations. A third in the far south of the colony appeared to be reasonably independent of Magarey's input. Graeme Chapman, *One Lord, One Faith, One Baptism: A History of Churches of Christ in Australia* (Melbourne, Vic: Vital Publications, 1979), 13–15.

11. Verco, *Thomas*, 71.

12. "Bishop" was a term of endearment used to describe Alexander Campbell by those around Bethany and not a formal title, as Campbell himself was anti-clerical. Leroy Garrett, *The Stone-Campbell Movement: The Story of the American Restoration Movement*, rev. and exp. ed. (Joplin, MO: College Press, 1996), 229–30.

13. Garrett, *The Stone-Campbell Movement*, 230.

14. Verco, *Thomas*, 71.

15. Williams, Foster, and Blowers, *The Stone-Campbell Movement*, 111–12.

rural areas.¹⁶ “The influence of the Americans despite their small number was considerable.”¹⁷

By 1875, the first cooperative union of Churches of Christ, including twelve established congregations from across the state, was inaugurated for the purpose of supporting further evangelistic efforts.¹⁸ The core purpose of the union was to raise funds to support evangelists and act as a point of reference for cooperating churches to preserve the integrity of theology and practice in Churches of Christ congregations. This was attempted with the adoption of nineteen articles to guide the union and determine the requirements by which any other congregations may join.¹⁹ The union was not without its problems. Efforts to broaden its membership were hampered by disagreements on one particular aspect of theology and practice, communion with the unimmersed.²⁰ In 1883, a second evangelistic union was formed, reflecting objections to the articles developed by the first that limited communion to the immersed.²¹ The two articles in contention (articles 2 and 16)²² were argued by a liberal element of the first union to be removed. The union was not a legislative organization, however, and article 19 clearly outlined the

16. A. W. Stephenson, *One Hundred Years: Churches of Christ in Australia* (Melbourne, Vic: Austral Printing & Publishing, 1946), 42.

17. Alexander Campbell and evangelists from Bethany College were not the only influences on the movement, but their legacy endures more prominently than any other. Foster et al., *Encyclopedia*, 49.

18. Williams, Foster, and Blowers, *The Stone-Campbell Movement*, 112.

19. H. R. Taylor, *The History of Churches of Christ in South Australia 1846–1959* (Adelaide, SA: Churches of Christ Evangelistic Union of South Australia, 1960), 37.

20. Chapman, *One Lord*, 80.

21. Williams, Foster, and Blowers, *The Stone-Campbell Movement*, 112.

22. Article 2 explicitly states that a congregation cannot be admitted to the Union if they knowingly share communion with the unimmersed. Article 16 was related to the same issue of immersion, barring the employment of evangelists who fellowship with the unimmersed. Taylor, *The History*, 38.

point that ensured liberty of congregational government and “freedom of thought where opinions on doctrine and practice were involved.”²³ In 1885, the two groups reached an agreement, forming the “Evangelistic Union of Churches of Christ in South Australia”²⁴ with the twenty-five congregations promising to reject open communion while avoiding inflammatory comments.²⁵ The resolutions passed included that the union advocate for one Lord, one faith, and one baptism for the sake of the proclamation of the gospel; that the entire Bible is the only rule of faith and practice; and that no church that knowingly has fellowship with the unimmersed at the Lord’s Table should be admitted into the association.²⁶

The formation of this Union was the first example of cooperating Churches of Christ in South Australia seeking to be united as much as possible in theology and practice while allowing for liberty of local church governance and interpretation of doctrine. Their united purpose was primarily for strengthening evangelism efforts across the state and the propagation and conservation of first principles Christianity as promoted by the Stone-Campbell Movement. “The Bible, the whole Bible and nothing but the Bible”²⁷ would serve as the only rule of faith and practice. No denominational creed or “humanly devised theological system” would govern the movement, and such creeds would only be referred to as necessary in order to avoid them.²⁸ The weekly fellowship of

23. Taylor, *The History*, 38.

24. Taylor, *The History*, 39.

25. Williams, Foster, and Blowers, *The Stone-Campbell Movement*, 112.

26. Taylor, *The History*, 38–39.

27. Taylor, *The History*, 39.

28. Chapman, *One Lord*, 94.

sharing in a remembrance of the Lord's Supper with the immersed only was to maintain the tradition of breaking bread with anyone who confessed Jesus as Lord and had done so by being baptized by full immersion in water for the remission of sins as taught and practiced in the New Testament. This informed the identity and practice of Churches of Christ in South Australia that would propel them into the twentieth century.

Data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics show that the Churches of Christ was firmly established in South Australia and suggests it was one of the strongest movements of Christian churches in the early years of the twentieth century.²⁹ Statistics reported by H. R. Taylor affirms a growing active church membership during this period.³⁰

The growth of Churches of Christ during this period is attributed to good coordination and intentional evangelistic strategy of the association of churches. In 1908, a federal Churches of Christ theological college was established in Melbourne, which resulted in more evangelists in the field. During this time evangelistic missions were coordinated and a home missions department was established.³¹

29. By 1921, the second Australian census was taken, revealing that 15,039 South Australians identified Churches of Christ as their denominational affiliation. This made up 3 percent of the state's population, growing at a faster rate than the total state population. This made it one of the fastest-growing Christian movements in South Australia behind the Methodists and Catholics while Presbyterians and Baptists were in decline. This followed a reported 9,324 affiliated with Churches of Christ at 2.3 percent of the population in the first census taken in 1911. Admittedly, Churches of Christ benefitted from the declining numbers of their Baptist counterparts, often accused of sheep stealing, but historical records are at pains to point out the number of first confessions of believers when adding to their number. Chapman, *One Lord*, 180; "Australian Bureau of Statistics," <https://www.ausstats.abs.gov.au>.

30. Taylor reports that between 1907 and 1929, Churches of Christ in South Australia planted forty-two churches, taking their number from twenty-eight congregations to seventy with membership increasing from 4,486 to 8,158, nearly doubling in size in just over twenty years. Taylor, *The History*, 55.

31. Williams, Foster, and Blowers, *The Stone-Campbell Movement*, 112.

Momentum and growth plateaued through the 1930s and 40s.³² Graeme Chapman refers to two major factors impacting the church and society at this time. The Great Depression and World War II led to some significant shifts in focus due to lack of people and material resources.³³ Perhaps the most significant pivot point for the movement was in the early 1930s in response to the Depression, when Churches of Christ shifted its focus from explicit evangelism to social services with an implicit focus on evangelism.³⁴ The period of uncertainty during World War I and into the 1920s, traditional evangelism was the focus. During this next period of uncertainty through the 1930s, Churches of Christ shifted its focus towards social services, yet the movement began to decline.

By the early 1950s, the movement had regrouped and reorganized seeking to centralize structures with established social services committees.³⁵ An incorporated structure was set in place in 1936 in order for the Union to hold property on behalf of churches as well as provide financial loans for the establishment of new churches.³⁶

The phenomenon of the evangelist Billy Graham visiting Adelaide in 1959 cannot be underestimated. Taylor references the “Dr. Graham Crusade” as a moment that “intensified the Spirit of evangelism” for the movement in South Australia.³⁷ However, there had already been efforts undertaken through the early 1950s to address the

32. While census data were still showing slight increases of people who associated with Churches of Christ in the state, active membership was declining to as low as 5,291 by 1952. Taylor, *The History*, 14.

33. Chapman, *One Lord*, 146.

34. Chapman, *One Lord*, 146.

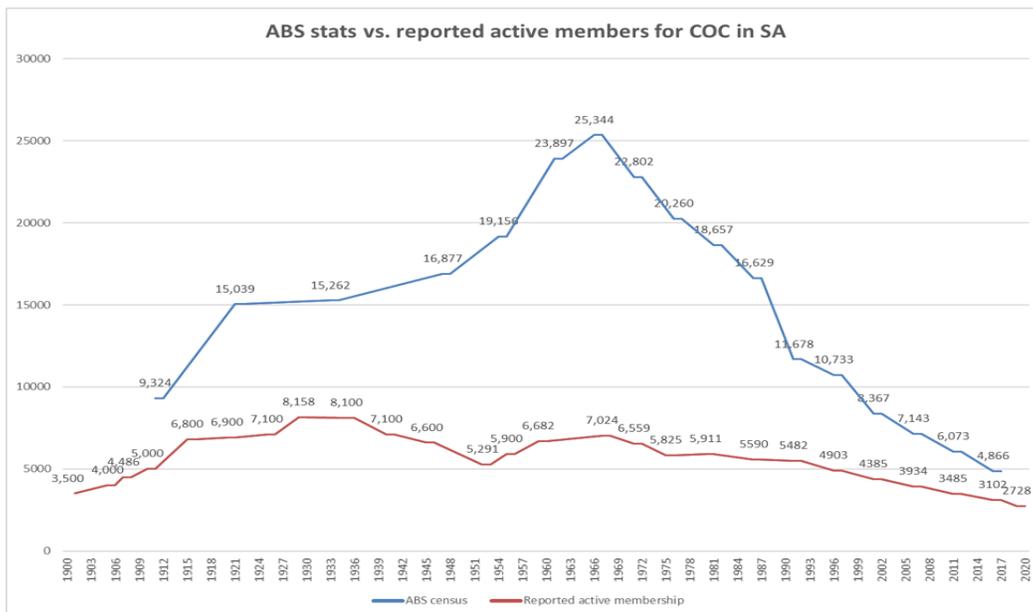
35. Chapman, *One Lord*, 150.

36. Taylor, *The History*, 56.

37. Taylor, *The History*, 31.

membership drift by partnering with American evangelists from the movement, which led to a surge in growth.³⁸ In 1959, there were a reported 6,682 active members in South Australia with seventy-six established churches and only eight churches reported to have closed since Churches of Christ first emerged (see figure 1).³⁹ In 1961, the census reported that 23,897 identified with Churches of Christ.⁴⁰ While the movement was on the rise again, there was a significant disconnect between the large number of people who reportedly identified with Churches of Christ and active church membership.

Figure 1. *Churches of Christ in South Australia Membership Trends*



Churches of Christ in South Australia reached its numerical peak in 1966.⁴¹ The introduction of the church growth movement in the 1970s did not to have much impact in

38. Chapman, *One Lord*, 167.

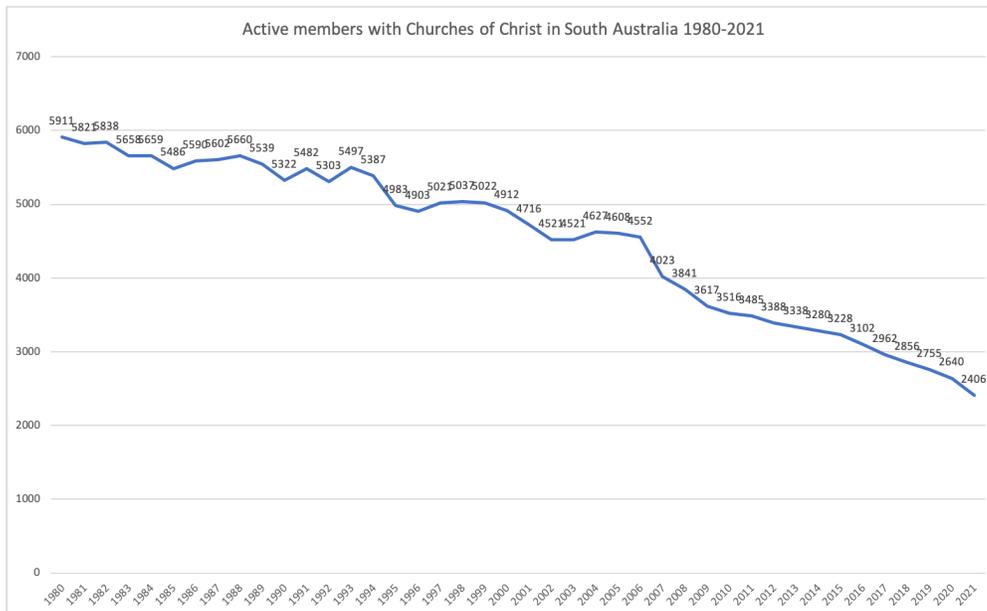
39. The number of children attending Sunday School outnumbered the active adult membership with 8,069 “scholars” reported in 1958. Taylor, *The History*, 58, 82.

40. “Australian Bureau of Statistics,” <https://www.ausstats.abs.gov.au>. As noted in the data for 1961.

41. In 1966, a reported 25,344 people identified Churches of Christ as their affiliated denomination. “Australian Bureau of Statistics,” <https://www.ausstats.abs.gov.au>.

South Australia, with the 1971 and 1976 censuses reporting decline (see figure 2).⁴² The active membership of Churches of Christ spread out rather than increasing with the final surge of sustained church plants being in the mid- to late-1970s.⁴³

Figure 2. *Active Members in Churches of Christ Congregations in South Australia 1980–2021*



Chapman reports that by the late 1970s, Churches of Christ were re-emphasizing restorationist beliefs and practices, stressing the importance of re-examining the biblical record, and encouraging the return to New Testament principles.⁴⁴ A resurgence of the plea for unity with a focus on Jesus and a renewed evangelistic effort led Churches of Christ with some hope into the 1980s.⁴⁵

42. Chapman, *One Lord*, 168.

43. Figure 1 shows there were 5,911 active members by 1980, yet 18,657 were reported to be affiliated with Churches of Christ in the 1981 census. “Australian Bureau of Statistics,” <https://www.ausstats.abs.gov.au>.

44. Chapman, *One Lord*, 179–80.

45. Chapman, *One Lord*, 180.

In 1998, the Churches of Christ Conference in South Australia discussed the effectiveness of its mission and a report was offered to the business session by the State Minister. The report acknowledged that 11,423 South Australians in the 1996 census declared Churches of Christ as their religious affiliation.⁴⁶ The reported active membership of churches at this time was 4,903.⁴⁷ Questions were subsequently presented to the Conference: why did these people cease their active association with our churches, and how do we help them re-establish within the active life of the church? In 2013, active membership had declined by a further 32 percent since 1996, and it was evident that mission needed to continue to be highlighted when the State Minister at the time reported to the Conference.

I believe our future as a movement is dependent, to a large degree, on our ability to reassign our resources in areas and ministries where effective mission is taking place, where new congregations are being planted and nurtured, and creative mission initiatives are being successful. This will undoubtedly require a significant mind shift for many of us.⁴⁸

Glimpses of the Past That Reflect the Present

I have developed a preliminary analysis of Churches of Christ in South Australia through general observations, reflections on conversations, and experience working with ministers and congregations across the state. It has been helpful to reflect through the Aristotelian empirical method for exploring practical theology as proposed by Richard Osmer to gain some understanding of what might be going on. The Aristotelian method

46. Churches of Christ SA & NT Inc., “AGM report” (archived report, Lutheran Archives, Bowden, SA 1998), 2.

47. See figure 1.

48. Churches of Christ SA & NT Inc., “AGM report” (archived report, Lutheran Archives, Bowden, SA 2013), 2.

of phronesis assists with making sense of learning from experience and the potential for transformation through reflective analysis.⁴⁹ Osmer suggests four core tasks for practical theological interpretation, which are outlined as descriptive, interpretive, normative, and pragmatic.⁵⁰ Correspondingly, Osmer suggests questions to guide each of the four tasks: What is going on? Why is it going on? What ought to be going on? How might we respond?⁵¹ These guiding questions have assisted me in developing some informed assumptions about my ministry context and how a problem could be identified to which I can respond.

Over the past one hundred years, Churches of Christ has gone from one of the more prominent and fastest-growing Protestant denominations in South Australia to one of the smallest and most rapidly diminishing.⁵² During the last few years, a review of Churches of Christ in South Australia revealed polarizing differences in the movement

49. Richard Osmer, "Empirical Practical Theology," in *Opening the Field of Practical Theology: An Introduction*, eds. Kathleen A Cahalan and Gordon S. Mikoski (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 62.

50. Richard R. Osmer, *Practical Theology: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 3–4. Additionally, Osmer dedicates a chapter to each of these tasks. The descriptive-empirical task is explained as interpreting the "living documents" of people's lives and practices. The interpretative task is to draw on theories for deeper understanding. The normative task draws together the theological reflection, virtues, and transforming practice to discern new actions, and the pragmatic task is about forming new strategies for action, pp. 32, 79, 130–31, 160, and 175.

51. Osmer, *Practical Theology*, 3.

52. Figure 1 shows statistical data of people associated with Churches of Christ in South Australia from 1900–2018. The Australian Bureau of Statistics link reveals a comparative analysis to other denominations. In 1921, 3 percent of the population are associated with Churches of Christ, making it the second largest Protestant church in South Australia. In the 2016 census, 0.3 percent of the population are associated with Churches of Christ. Comparatively, Churches of Christ is one of the smallest registered denominations. Figure 2 reveals a sharp decline in active members since 2006. Statistics have been obtained from a combination of sources including: "Australian Bureau of Statistics," www.ausstats.abs.gov.au; Taylor, *The History*, 64–67; Churches of Christ in South Australia state office archives.

over theology and practice.⁵³ There have always been levels of disagreement within the movement. Recently, disagreement has been experienced with an increased level of disenfranchisement, disconnection, and isolation. Over the past couple of decades, the movement has struggled with effective participation in mission and loss of missional imagination; loss of leadership carrying the story of the tradition; strengthening independence of congregations; and suspicion over perceived theological diversity. While traditional practices remain, they are shadows of the identity once engaged with and understood.

During the time I have served in ministry with Churches of Christ, I have observed attempts initiated by state leaders to recover the movement's identity and work towards missional innovation. These attempts were often met with suspicion due to a perceived lack of alignment with common theological principles. The drift in relationships, lack of trust in state leadership, and skepticism of the agendas of other congregations is evident in the way congregational leaders have continued to engage. This project is being developed within a context where the whole association has been under formal review, and this process has brought congregational leaders into dialogue about challenges that exist in the movement.

Reflecting through my ministry experience and reviewing the literature surveyed in the historical context, a number of issues have been identified. A deficit in communication leading to low trust and lack of convergence on common theological principles have led to a growing isolation of congregations from the association of

53. The review was commissioned in 2016 by the State Board, which governs the association of Churches of Christ in South Australia. The review was formally concluded in 2020.

churches intended to be united for mission and evangelistic efforts. Rather than a dynamic movement that celebrates its story and identity together, it has become a static and dying denomination.

When the Union of South Australian Churches of Christ congregations was first inaugurated in the late nineteenth century, the intent was to preserve the integrity of the movement's theological identity and practices. Adopting principles that guided this was necessary for promoting common ground. However, freedom of thought where there were differences of opinion on doctrine and practice was always the delicate compromise of autonomous expressions within the Union.

Throughout the twentieth century, tensions existed between social service and evangelism. This tension still exists with some advocating they are one and the same and others identifying significant differences in theological approaches to the task of evangelism. The historical overview referenced a pivotal moment for the movement in 1936, when focus shifted from evangelism to social services. For whatever gain was achieved in serving the community, current conversations suggest an ongoing struggle to form disciples who actively participate in the life and ministry of Churches of Christ.

The statistics tell a story of the effectiveness of the movement to replicate according to their primary theological commitments. The argument around social services and evangelism has often been contentious, with some leaders referring to a social gospel that neglects the traditions and confessions of Christianity while others argue that social service is a legitimate outworking of the gospel. Evidence that social service programs have contributed to growth or effective disciple making is difficult to identify. There can be a harmonious relationship between the two if the purpose for the

church and the evangelistic task within a cultural environment are understood. This requires a deep dive into understanding theological principles as shaped by a common understanding of how Scripture is read and used to activate God's people in response to mission. I will address this in the next chapter.

Agreement that Scripture reveals Christ as the ultimate authority shaping the identity of the movement is broad. However, there is concern that commitment to Scripture is compromised by other hermeneutical sources such as culture and experience. This includes shifts in normative cultural trends, such as a growing acceptance of personal autonomy and self-determination in all things, including interpretation of Scripture in response to social agendas. Does Scripture really guide us, and if so, how? Is the movement swayed to accommodate the whims of society for the sake of relevance? How do we appreciate and hold credible hermeneutical lenses in tension with our commitment to first principles? How do these hermeneutical lenses dialogue with each another to enrich the movement? In the midst of all of this is a need to rediscover the movement's missional vocation. With no clear commitment to attend to Scripture in communal dialogue, practices are varied and unpredictable. The practical inattention to communal dialogue with Scripture as the authoritative guide has inhibited the movement's missional practice.

Despite the challenges the movement faces, observations and conversations reveal a common denominator. Ministers and congregational leaders are driven by a common confession that Jesus Christ is Lord and Savior. This may appear to be stating the obvious, but one of the tensions fueling distrust between ministers and key leaders across congregations is the assumption that even the most fundamental theological principles at

the foundation of the movement are in question. I have not uncovered that such a threat is evident; however, the lack of attention to dialogue between all leaders continues to feed suspicions that the theological integrity of the movement is at risk.

My participation in the review has given me deeper insights into the concerns and aspirations of Churches of Christ in South Australia. I have been able to listen for what aspects of the movement's identity remain driving principles in congregations today. These include the prominence of Scripture as an authoritative text that shapes and guides congregations; a desire for a unified church that appreciates and celebrates diversity; and autonomous governance with an interdependence of resource sharing. These are still regarded as identity markers for Churches of Christ today.

Adding to these principles, I have observed practices that are still meaningful to the identity of Churches of Christ congregations. These include the weekly practice of communion as an open table Christ invites us to;⁵⁴ baptism by immersion for remission of sins; and the church as a gathering of the priesthood of all believers where everyone has the opportunity to participate in ministry for the edification of the body of Christ.⁵⁵ These practices hold true to the three ordinances of the church expressed by Alexander Campbell, which will be explored further in the next chapter. A lack of informed doctrine that strengthens confession and practice creates a haphazard and individualistic approach to how the association of Churches of Christ in South Australia understands its identity.

54. The open table is a noticeably different posture to what was once advocated for in the early development of Churches of Christ in South Australia. Historical records indicate there was much more exclusion over the unimmersed breaking bread with the immersed during the formation of the Evangelistic Union of Churches of Christ in 1885. This is not a concern across many churches today, which reflects a much more ecumenical environment.

55. This is often referred to in literature as Alexander Campbell's ordinance of keeping "the Lord's Day." I have extended this to reflect the mutual ministry of all who gather as the church.

This is at the core of the problem facing the movement today. The presenting problems are less about diversity of theology and practice and more about ill-informed perceptions due to lack of accountability, cooperation, and trust.

Churches of Christ was more sectarian in the earlier years, as reflected in their articles of faith that formed a rigid exclusivity compared a more contemporary embrace of ecumenism. There is a rich ecumenical presence reflected in congregations today, but this is more to do with geographical convenience or personal taste than the theological foundations by which Churches of Christ may be known. A new challenge has emerged with many leadership teams composed of people who are not well-informed by the tradition of the movement. Along with this lack of understanding comes a drift in the meaning and importance of the above-mentioned ordinances. Churches are not necessarily anchored by a tradition that is passed on from generation to generation.

My observation is that Churches of Christ congregations in South Australia have an increased attachment to seeking solutions through human agency over reliance on divine agency as the catalyst for transformation. Reliance on human action has heavily informed the movement's practice of mission. Reflections on statistics lead me to conclude that the presence of Churches of Christ in South Australia is rapidly diminishing, and there is a pessimism about its future. However, there is possibility in what has emerged as a state of liminality that creates space for an awareness of God's activity. There has been a long journey to this point and a building dissatisfaction with the performance of the movement and its projected future. Susan Beaumont says, "Liminality emerges through the slow death of systems or structures that have outlived

their usefulness.”⁵⁶ The emergence of liminality in this context is a long-awaited gift for initiating transformation.

Gordon Stirling argues that no matter what innovations or interpretations have pressed in on the movement, overlooking or challenging its core identity, essential parts of its heritage are necessary to take into the future. These include the commitment to participating in God’s kingdom through making disciples and proclaiming good news about Jesus; sharing in the sacraments of communion and believers’ baptism by immersion; and congregational autonomy with a commitment to mutual cooperation.⁵⁷ The historical overview above displays evidence that these parts of the Church of Christ heritage were effective in South Australia at one point; however, recent observations show this heritage is at risk. The question remains: what does Churches of Christ in South Australia exist for, and what is it currently preserving?

Churches of Christ congregations in South Australia are anxious and reactive within a rapidly changing culture. In this liminal season of discontentment, we live in hope of the grace of God. This lays the foundation for possibility because God is active and God’s kingdom is still emerging. The movement has people of influence who live out the story of its heritage each day, but it is a story that requires reimagining to strengthen an identity that will form renewed practice in proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ and participating in God’s mission. Inherited structures and resources are not the only things

56. Susan Beaumont, *How to Lead When You Don’t Know Where You Are Going: Leading in a Liminal Season* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019), 10.

57. Gordon Stirling’s thirteen clauses, while not entirely unique to Churches of Christ, were stated as a plea for the movement to articulate a dynamic language that implied movement together. Gordon Stirling, *Churches of Christ: Interpreting Ourselves for the New Century* (Melbourne, Vic: Vital Publications, 1999), 49–50.

that shape a future. As suggested by the State Minister in the 2013 Conference report, there is a “mind shift” required across the movement.⁵⁸ This will mean surrendering to new possibilities, which increases the potential to respond to the mystery and activity of God.

The renewal of Churches of Christ in South Australia requires a reimagining of theological principles that inform renewed missional practice. This will reignite missional imagination and re-orient the church to an awareness of God’s activity, inviting the church into a future. This reimagining will include a proposal for considering a canonical theism, constructing a practical theological method for the principles that underpin the movement’s foundations. This theological foundation will in turn inform a process for revitalizing the missional imagination of Churches of Christ as a movement and how it understands the nature of participating in God’s mission.

Statement of the Problem

The problem identified for Churches of Christ in South Australia is a lack of clear theological principles that set the foundations for missional vitality. Contributing to this problem is a historical commitment embedded in the movement’s foundations not to define doctrine through creedal statements. The most effective way to address this problem is through strengthening dialogue within the Union of associated churches. However, a culture of individualism and autonomy contributes to the problem of no shared theological identity or commitment to cooperative mission.

The Purpose of This Study

The purpose of this project is to develop a study guide for Churches of Christ

58. Churches of Christ SA & NT Inc., AGM report, 2013, 2.

congregations in South Australia that identifies key theological principles and grounds the movement for missional vitality. The intervention will gather a small group of ministers from across the movement to shape appropriate content for a study guide. This will serve as a central resource for churches to have a common starting point for this conversation. The study guide seeks to address the dilemma of not knowing how to start a conversation about theological proposals for Churches of Christ in South Australia. It also proposes a framework that invites churches to consider a renewed identity as a movement, revitalizing its missional nature and practice. A common resource will also address the growing independence of associated churches and invite interdependent cooperation for mission.

Basic Assumptions

My leading assumption is that a lack of clarity on theological principles is due to a lack of dialogue among key leaders across associated Churches of Christ in South Australia. It is difficult to identify common denominators in the association that unify the churches as a movement. There are still common practices, but theological principles are rarely discussed for fear of being excluded or made an example of because of disagreement. This project assumes that diversity within Churches of Christ has become a distraction to effective mission. I have an assumption that gathering together common themes for further exploration and producing a study guide to communicate these themes will be welcomed and utilized. In addressing the identified problem, I am assuming there will be enough desire and goodwill among ministers to participate in the intervention.

Delimitations and Limitations

This project will be delimited to congregations that are members of the

association of Churches of Christ in South Australia. Participants in the project will be actively involved in member churches. This project will also be delimited to the function of theology in shaping a church's meaningful association with the movement. This means the project will focus specifically on the role of theology in determining a church's association with Churches of Christ in South Australia.

This study has significant limitations. The most significant limitation is the autonomy and free association of each congregation within the movement. This study will be limited to those who have interest in it; participation cannot be mandated. Each church is independently governed and has freedom of self-determination in matters of theology. The study suggests a construction of a theological framework for Churches of Christ in South Australia, which presents a challenge within this context.

Selective participation may limit perspectives shared and skew the data towards idealistic points of view or a theological perspective that is not widely represented. It is important to be aware of the Hawthorne Effect⁵⁹ in this regard because this project may only attract people who want me to succeed in this task.

The dominant ethnicity of people who attend Churches of Christ in South Australia is White Euro-Western, so diversity in the sample group will be a limitation. The study will only represent this ethnic perspective, and the average age of participants is likely to be over fifty years of age. This represents the majority of members of Churches of Christ in South Australia.

The outcome of the intervention is to develop a study guide with an aspiration

59. Tim Sensing, *Qualitative Research: A Multi-Methods Approach to Projects for Doctor of Ministry Dissertations*, 2nd ed. (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2022), 165.

that it will help re-orient and transform the movement of Churches of Christ in South Australia. The existence of the study guide itself will not necessarily change anything. It will be limited by participants' willingness to engage with the suggested topics and practices.

Summary

This chapter has introduced my ministry context in two distinct ways. First, I offered a historical narrative that provides some context on the influences that have shaped Churches of Christ in South Australia. Then, I reflected on my own lived experience as a leader in the movement, contrasting my experience of Churches of Christ today with the historical narrative. My own insights are not isolated observations but are informed through ongoing interactions and conversations with leaders in the movement about the presenting issues. The intervention is designed to draw ministers from the breadth of the movement together to address what has been described in the problem statement. Their task will be to create a study guide that will be used to help Churches of Christ congregations have informed conversations about a theological framework that helps revitalize missional participation. The following chapter will propose a conceptual and theological framework that will offer some orientation for the intervention team to develop a study guide.

CHAPTER II

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Bridging a Heritage with Contemporary Theology

The theological foundation for this project will focus on a Trinitarian theology underpinning a holistic approach to the eschatological nature of God’s mission in the world. The vision guiding Churches of Christ in South Australia presumes an expectation that God’s own activity informs its identity as a movement that is always on the move, thereby reflecting the dynamic of divine agency. The movement’s current vision and mission statement reflects this theological commitment, reflecting aspects of the Trinity functioning as the catalyst for a movement that is dynamic, vital, and relevant.¹

I will approach the problem stated for this project by drawing on the heritage of Churches of Christ in South Australia while comparing and contrasting contemporary reformed theological perspectives. First, it is important that Restoration theology be understood through the influence of historical figures. Restorationist ideas shaped by Alexander Campbell took root in South Australia, giving birth to Churches of Christ.² Campbell was not the only influence, but he was seminal. This study will focus attention

1. The vision and mission statement for Churches of Christ in South Australia & Northern Territory was developed and adopted in 2001. It is aspirational more than functional, and there has not been an attempt at revisiting it since its creation. Although it is published on the Churches of Christ in South Australia website, it is a “lost document” and rarely referred to. “Vision and Mission Statement: Churches of Christ in South Australia and Northern Territory,” <https://www.churchesofchrist-sa.org.au/d/512d83UgQS9QAZQvVDCe4zyw3>

2. Chapman, *One Lord*, 13; Verco, *Thomas*, 54, 150; Foster et al., *Encyclopedia*, 47.

on his epistemology as it was shaped by Scottish common-sense realism out of which came certain theological commitments that framed the movement.

Observers of Churches of Christ could conclude that the movement exists within a vacuum with no particular theological or doctrinal commitments that inform the tradition. There is hesitancy to continue moving towards the Restorationist ideal of union due to a lack of understanding about what the churches have in common. A brief exploration of the epistemology and reforming theological perspectives of sixteenth and seventeenth-century philosophers who influenced Campbell will help explore the heritage of theological principles underpinning Churches of Christ in South Australia. This study seeks to bring aspects of the movement's deep theological heritage to the surface for examination in a contemporary environment.³

The study will focus on Campbell's epistemology of a doctrine of God (defined by others as Trinitarianism) and how this informs a dynamic mission for Churches of Christ.⁴ Campbell's theological commitments articulated in the later years of his ministry chronologically correlate with the emergence of the movement in South Australia in 1846. This provides a helpful foundation for examining how an explicit doctrine of the Trinity shapes the identity and practices of Churches of Christ in South Australia.

I seek to add some framing to the discussion on Trinitarian theology that may help bridge some gaps in understanding Campbell's view of the doctrine of God, which is not

3. Jeff W. Childers, Douglas A. Foster, and Jack Reese, *The Crux of the Matter: Crisis, Tradition, and the Future of Churches of Christ* (Abilene, TX: ACU Press, 2002), 78.

4. Campbell rejected Trinitarian terminology because it was not a biblical term. Mark E. Powell, John Mark Hicks, and Greg McKinzie, *Discipleship in Community: A Theological Vision for the Future* (Abilene, TX: Leafwood Publishers, 2020), 31. According to Douglas Foster, Campbell explicitly stated that he believed in the "equal Godhead or Divinity of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." Douglas A. Foster, *A Life of Alexander Campbell* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020), 109.

always clearly stated. I will introduce *perichoresis* as a way of discussing the dynamic of the relational Trinity. John Franke describes *perichoresis* as the dynamic interdependent relationality within the plurality of the Trinity.⁵

Franke also offers some helpful insights into understanding a contentious saying within the movement: “in essentials unity, in nonessentials liberty, in all things love.”⁶ The saying informs two critical aspects of this discussion: biblical interpretation (liberty) and missional effectiveness (Christian unity). Franke suggests that diversity and plurality do not allow for an “anything goes” relativism but rather a framework for how we should expect to engage matters of theology and biblical interpretation.⁷ There is diversity within the biblical canon and diversity within the Trinity. This diversity represents the essential continuity of the Christian tradition expressed within Churches of Christ, which is dynamic and responsive to the mission of God.

The final component of this discussion is informed by contemporary reformed theological perspectives. Drawing from perspectives in applied Trinitarian missional theology, theologians such as Karl Barth, Jürgen Moltmann and Catherine LaCugna lay the groundwork for what is explored through more recent contemporary reformed theology. Starting with David Bosch, who argues for a reorientation of theology as missional, practicing theologians such as Andrew Root, John Franke, Darrell Guder, Alan Roxburgh, Gordon Buxton, and Mark Lau Branson build on Trinitarian perspectives.

5. It is fair to say that this description of the doctrine of God reflects Alexander Campbell’s theological commitment. John R. Franke, *Missional Theology: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2020), 16.

6. Stirling, *Churches of Christ*, 38.

7. Franke, *Missional Theology*, 112–13.

They articulate the inter-relationality of God in perichoretic mission and how this divine agency invites the church to participate in the life of God.

Drawing on contemporary reformed theology and contrasting it with Campbell's doctrine of God will highlight a renewed conversation for Churches of Christ congregations in South Australia. I will discuss the convergence and divergence of this theological framework in the pursuit of mapping a helpful theological orthodoxy for Churches of Christ in South Australia. It is my intention to draw focus back to a dynamic theological imagination that has been neglected through efforts to revitalize a movement influenced by a modernistic subjective approach. Churches of Christ in South Australia need to recalibrate practices within a renewed understanding of a Trinitarian missiology, using the idea of *perichoresis* as a proposal for engaging a canonical theism.⁸ A renewed theological understanding will inform a revitalized engagement with God's mission and the ecclesiology of the movement as an expression of that mission.

The Influence of Alexander Campbell

Alexander Campbell's influence on the emergence of Churches of Christ in South Australia has already been noted. Chapman acknowledges that the influences of the British Churches of Christ and American Disciples on establishing Churches of Christ in

8. William Abraham offers thirty theses to initiate a discussion on canonical theism. "Canonical theism is a term invented to capture the robust form of theism manifested, lived and expressed in the canonical heritage of the church" (Thesis 1). Canonical theism proposes the presence of the Holy Spirit continues to shape this heritage (Thesis 13) because the nature of God's mission is eschatological. Canonical theism reflects the dynamic of God's agency in the canonical heritage of the church. William J. Abraham, "Canonical Theism: Thirty Theses," in *Canonical Theism: A Proposal for Theology and the Church*, eds. William J. Abraham, Jason E. Vickers, and Natalie B. Van Kirk (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 1–7. Jason Vickers adds, that the canonical heritage functions to "occasion and facilitate entry into the life of the triune God." Jason E. Vickers, "Canonical Theism and the Primacy of Ontology: An Essay Concerning Human Understanding in Trinitarian Perspective," in *Canonical Theism: A Proposal for Theology and the Church*, eds. William J. Abraham, Jason E. Vickers, and Natalie B. Van Kirk (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 156.

Australia are indebted to Campbell for their common commitment to “restore the Church her lost unity.”⁹

One of Campbell’s theological commitments includes applying reason to the interpretation of Scripture as the primary source of the revelation of God. Following this theological method for articulating a contemporary understanding of the doctrine of God could be a discipline through which Christians might find unity in faith.¹⁰ Campbell’s theological commitments reveal the nature of the movement’s mission, to be one in Christ. That is not to be confused with unity of opinion, which has become a stumbling block when considering convergence and divergence on matters of theology. This ideal of unity is held in tension with another of Campbell’s commitments, local congregational autonomy. The movement enabled congregations to have freedom of governance and self-determination (i.e. not controlled by humanly devised systems of conformity such as creeds and clerical hierarchy). This was not to say that each congregation ought to be strictly independent of one another, but they would be free from the shackles of institutional imposition. These introductory acknowledgements about Alexander Campbell’s influence invite an exploration into how that influence may have enduring significance today.

Epistemological Influences

Alexander Campbell was a scholar of Enlightenment philosophy as much as he was a scholar of Scripture. Among the most influential figures in his life was first and foremost his father, Thomas Campbell, who ensured his classical education and

9. Chapman, *One Lord*, 21.

10. Robert Richardson, *Principles of the Reformation*, ed. Carson E. Reed (Orange, CA: New Leaf Books, 2002), 32.

introduced him to the writing of seventeenth-century philosopher John Locke.¹¹ The publication of Thomas Campbell’s “Declaration and Address” in 1809 (considered a foundational document of the movement) began to solidify key theological and ecclesiological commitments for Alexander Campbell. Foster says that Campbell studied his father’s proposals carefully and fully agreed with the plan set out in the address.¹² This proposal included a commitment to Scripture in order to restore the original standard and simple truths of Christianity, anti-sectarianism, and a restoration of the original constitution of Christian unity.¹³ The appeal to careful study of Scripture to discover the plain and simple truths for the promotion of the unity of the church would be a driving agenda for Alexander Campbell. He believed Scripture was the final authority on all doctrine and that this approach would lead to the revelation of God and vision for the unity of the church.¹⁴ His methods were informed by more than just his father’s work, as will be explored in the following paragraphs.

A contemporary reflection of Alexander Campbell’s agenda is that he was focused on restoring the forms and patterns of the first-century church in a new time and place for the purpose of uniting the Christian church through the recovery of New Testament practices.¹⁵ While this is true, what is overlooked is the heritage that informed Campbell and informs the movement still. Jeff Childers, Douglas Foster, and Jack Reese

11. Foster, *A Life*, 32.

12. Foster, *A Life*, 43.

13. Foster, *A Life*, 28.

14. Childers, Foster, and Reese, *The Crux*, 77.

15. Jack R. Reese, *At the Blue Hole: Elegy for a Church on the Edge* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2021), 207–8.

offer a helpful map of the ancestry of the movement, tracking the influences contributing to Campbell's formation and thinking.¹⁶ The Puritan, Presbyterian tradition within which Alexander Campbell's father was originally an ordained minister provides an ecclesiological background. The story behind the "Declaration and Address" includes a rejection of schisms within this tradition. What is also included in this ancestral map is Enlightenment philosophy and the emerging context of the North American frontier where the movement was born. All of these essential elements are important to acknowledge in Alexander Campbell's epistemological development.

Sixteenth- and seventeenth-century philosophers Isaac Newton, Francis Bacon, and John Locke are regarded by many as some of the most influential figures in Campbell's studies. The ideas of these philosophers helped to solidify Campbell's approach to Scripture, which would determine how he shaped the movement's commitments. Newton and Bacon's common-sense principles around investigation of the facts and search for knowledge are foundational for Campbell's reading of Scripture. Rather than bringing theories to Scripture, Campbell's inductive method sought to form his theology out of the truths revealed by the Holy Spirit through Scripture. Garrett reflects on Campbell's use of Newton's principle of the "application of the mind" in order to search for the facts that ultimately lead to the truths imbedded in Scripture.¹⁷ Additionally, Garrett's brief summary of Bacon offers helpful insight into Campbell's suspicion of traditionalism. Bacon's work on "the idols of the mind" highlighted the

16. Their ancestry map begins with the early church tracking through to western Protestant reformations, in particular the reformed traditions influenced by Zwingli and Calvin. Childers, Foster, and Reese, *The Crux*, 89.

17. Garrett, *The Stone-Campbell Movement*, 22–23.

fallacy of the creeds in that theological proposals were accepted without the critical analysis of applying reason to Scripture in search of the facts that would lead to logical theological conclusions.¹⁸ “Bacon helped Campbell develop an inductive approach to the bible, in which one draws conclusions only in terms of what is observably evident.”¹⁹ Baconism became one of the driving philosophies throughout Campbell’s life as the common-sense philosophy lent itself well to Campbell’s inductive method of reading Scripture. The doctrine of Scripture was that the truth of the gospel can be determined by applying the mind to the facts Scripture revealed. For Campbell, “[t]he common sense hermeneutic offered the movement an (appealing) evangelistic methodology.”²⁰

Locke’s *Letters on Toleration*, echoed in Thomas Campbell’s “Declaration and Address,” formed the basis of Alexander Campbell’s commitment to Christian unity.²¹ “Locke’s plea for freedom, toleration, and for a better understanding of the nature of knowledge”²² was foundational for the movement’s principle of unity. The commitment for nothing to be made a test of communion derived from Locke.²³ Locke’s *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* also needs to be noted with particular reference to Campbell’s view of reason and revelation. Foster notes, through Robert Richardson’s biographical memoirs about Campbell, that Campbell had a conversion experience

18. Garrett, *The Stone-Campbell Movement*, 23–24.

19. Garrett, *The Stone-Campbell Movement*, 24.

20. Foster et al., *Encyclopedia*, 231.

21. Williams, Foster, and Blowers, *The Stone-Campbell Movement*, 487; Childers, Foster, and Reese, *The Crux*, 85.

22. Garrett, *The Stone-Campbell Movement*, 25.

23. Garrett, *The Stone-Campbell Movement*, 26.

through the reading of Scripture.²⁴ It is a significant insight into how revelation and reason work together. Though, according to Foster, Campbell downplayed the mystery of this spiritual experience, the conversion experience itself offers insight into how the mystery of God works with Campbell's epistemology of reason. Campbell agreed with Locke that divine revelation can lead one to the truth about God, so long as it is not contradictory to applied reason.²⁵

Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen offers some helpful insights into the influence of Locke on Enlightenment epistemology that bears relevance to this conversation. Rational approaches to Scripture continued to present Christianity with credibility in a scientific world. However, the rational approach pushed divine revelation aside in pursuit of a scientific method that would reveal the mysteries of the world.²⁶ Garrett says that Campbell expressed Locke's ideas by stating that "one's faith in something should be no stronger than the evidence that supports it."²⁷ Campbell also writes that "the end and intention of all our reasoning is to discover things unknown."²⁸ Garrett contends that Locke may well have influenced the famous motto of the movement: "in the essentials unity, in opinions liberty, in all things charity." The essentials were clear: faith in Jesus

24. Foster, *A Life*, 33–34.

25. Foster, *A Life*, 38.

26. Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *The Doctrine of God: A Global Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 112. Campbell follows Locke's lead in his approach to Trinitarian language. Kärkkäinen notes that Locke could not see evidence of Jesus teaching a Trinitarian doctrine.

27. Garrett, *The Stone-Campbell Movement*, 28.

28. Foster, *A Life*, 39.

Christ as Lord and obedience to his commands. Everything else fell into the category of opinion.²⁹

A final comment to be made about Campbell's epistemology is the influence of his university education at Glasgow University and the philosophy of Scottish common-sense realism. Before Campbell immigrated to America, he studied at the Scottish university, where he absorbed the Scottish common-sense philosophy of eighteenth-century philosopher Thomas Reid.³⁰ Foundational to Reid's philosophy was to bring the human senses into conversation with the testimony of others in determining a reliable source of knowledge.³¹ This philosophical line of enquiry harnessed the power of knowledge and appealed to the common-sense philosophy of Locke.³² This common-sense approach adopted by Campbell was applied as a methodology for believers from various backgrounds to determine the general facts of the Bible and arrive at a common understanding on things that matter.³³

A desired outcome from Campbell's commitment to apply common-sense philosophy to Scripture was Christian unity. Campbell did not believe this could be achieved simply through reason or some other means of human effort. He deduced through a process of elimination that the truth of the Scriptures can only be known by "God's revelation of the moral law through faith in the testimony of the biblical

29. Garrett, *The Stone-Campbell Movement*, 29.

30. Foster, *A Life*, 36.

31. Williams, Foster, and Blowers, *The Stone-Campbell Movement*, 20.

32. Garrett, *The Stone-Campbell Movement*, 30.

33. Garrett, *The Stone-Campbell Movement*, 31.

writers.”³⁴ His commitment to the revelation of biblical truths for instruction on how to live a moral life extended to silence on matters where Scripture was silent.³⁵ This supported his argument for practices that ought to be prohibited because they are not specifically instructed. This also directed his focus towards what Scripture instructed be practiced by all Christians. This principle birthed some of the most famous sayings of the movement: “Bible names for Bible things” and “where the Scriptures are silent, we are silent; where the Scriptures speak, we speak.”

A common-sense approach to Scripture led Campbell to determine the core ordinances of the church as they were ordered by Scripture. These included the Lord’s Day, the Lord’s Supper, and baptism by immersion.³⁶ Campbell’s epistemology, while setting a clear path forward for a movement, also invited much conflict. This is attributed partly to Campbell’s preference for brushing aside creeds in favor of determining the revelation of God through a careful study of the Scriptures.

Campbell’s anti-creedal position destabilized walls constructed within traditionalism and invited like-minded Christians to continue to discover the mystery of God beyond the traditions of the church. One of the arguments William Abraham offers for canonical theism is for developing “a vision of special revelation that is enshrined in a unique way in Scripture.”³⁷ While the creeds secured the tradition of the Christian faith,

34. J. Caleb Clanton, *The Philosophy of Religion of Alexander Campbell* (Knoxville, TN: The University of Tennessee Press, 2013), 126.

35. James Gorman, *Among the Early Evangelicals: The Transatlantic Origins of the Stone-Campbell Movement* (Abilene, TX: ACU Press, 2017), 189.

36. Foster et al., *Encyclopedia*, 579.

37. William J. Abraham, “Canonical Theism and Evangelicalism,” in *Canonical Theism: A Proposal for Theology and the Church*, eds. William J. Abraham, Jason E. Vickers, and Natalie B. Van Kirk (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 269. Natalie Van Kirk states that “the canonical heritage of the church goes beyond a set of texts and the creeds.” Natalie Van Kirk, “Imagining Theology: The Canon of

the dogmatic application of creeds impeded Campbell's vision for Christian unity. For Campbell to pursue his vision, he disturbed canonized epistemological methods.

A Doctrine of God

Campbell's common-sense approach to Scripture and the Christian faith in general is important background for considering how he understood the nature of God. Evidence suggests that he held to a Trinitarian perspective as accepted within orthodoxy; however, this was not explicitly articulated as Trinitarian by Campbell himself. I have taken a lead from Mark Powell, John Mark Hicks, and Greg McKinzie to explore Campbell's hesitation about the term Trinitarian and why the use of the term may need to be revisited through contemporary theological insights.

Powell, Hicks, and McKinzie assert that Campbell held to the same Trinitarian beliefs as Christians of the first few centuries,³⁸ commenting that "trinitarian doctrine provides a concrete, historical vision of God ... which is foundational for Christian belief."³⁹ They also comment that Trinitarian doctrine helps give credibility to the "unity in diversity" rhetoric that has been a foundational plea for the movement, asserting that the Trinity offers a dynamic example of the diversity of the divine community of God.⁴⁰ This complements Campbell's doctrine of God articulated in his opening chapter of *The Christian System*: "Hence we have the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit; yet these are

Images," in *Canonical Theism: A Proposal for Theology and the Church*, eds. William J. Abraham, Jason E. Vickers, and Natalie B. Van Kirk (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 120.

38. Powell, Hicks, and McKinzie, *Discipleship*, 33. It should be noted that Trinitarian theology was contested among the patristic fathers, but the dominant view considered as orthodox is what emerged as the preferred theology of the Trinity to be stated in the creeds.

39. Powell, Hicks, and McKinzie, *Discipleship*, 39.

40. Powell, Hicks, and McKinzie, *Discipleship*, 27.

equally divine, though personally distinct from each other. We have in fact, but one God, one Lord, one Holy Spirit; yet these are equally possessed of one and the same divine nature.”⁴¹

One reason for Campbell’s avoidance of the term “Trinitarian” is already stated: the word Trinity cannot be found in Scripture; in other words, speculative, non-biblical terms were avoided.⁴² When the Stone-Campbell Movement emerged, the doctrine of the Trinity was viewed as mysterious and abstract and was a highly-debated theological issue. Consequently, this created opportunities for division, which was counter to Campbell’s vision. Stephen Seamands indicates that the Enlightenment brought about a revival of Trinitarian theology mainly due to the fact that orthodox views were being contested and therefore needed to be defended.⁴³ With the trend of rational approaches to the doctrine of God growing, defense of orthodox Trinitarianism was viewed as unnecessary by many who had moved towards more progressive rationalistic methods.

A Trinitarian doctrine of God, though implicitly held by most who participated in the Churches of Christ movement, was never stated explicitly and could be regarded as a matter of theological opinion. For the purpose of this study, it is important to acknowledge the difference of opinion on the doctrine of God held by the movement’s two most prominent leaders, Alexander Campbell and Barton Stone. I will argue for Campbell’s relational Trinitarian perspective as a basis for exploring what others have

41. Alexander Campbell, *The Christian System*, 5th ed. (Cincinnati, OH: Standard Publishing Company, 1901), 8.

42. Foster, *A Life*, 97.

43. Stephen Seamands, *Ministry in the Image of God: The Trinitarian Shape of Christian Service* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2003), 16.

articulated as social Trinity. It informs what became a dominant doctrine of God for the movement and will set the foundation for what will help congregations in my ministry context embrace new insights for a dynamic Trinitarian theology.⁴⁴

Differences of opinion about the doctrine of God was significant between Stone and Campbell, so much so that Campbell tried to carefully distance himself from Stone's view as much as possible without jeopardizing their union. Campbell needed to hold the tension of his vision for unity with his convictions about the nature of God. Stone rejected the orthodox view of the Trinity, which included the preexistence of Christ and the equality of the three persons of the Godhead. Campbell held firmly to the view that the divine nature of God the Father, Jesus the Son (Word incarnate), and the Holy Spirit were equally divine and equally co-operant.⁴⁵ Garrett highlights, through the perspective of historian A. W. Fortune, Campbell's lack of enthusiasm about the union with Stone due to public accusations about Stone's Arian doctrine of the Trinity.⁴⁶ This tension is discussed by Jim Cook, highlighting Campbell's careful public defense of Stone. The union between them in 1832, setting an important trajectory for the movement, was too important to compromise.⁴⁷ Campbell was able to state his concern to Stone over the issue, suggesting Stone's theological position was causing him to abandon his

44. Powell, Hicks, and McKinzie, *Discipleship*, 19–20, 31–33.

45. Foster, *A Life*, 97. Foster's footnotes outline Campbell's Trinitarian theology by quoting his writings in various *Millennial Harbinger* essays in 1846 and 1856, defending his position against Unitarianism and Arianism.

46. Garrett, *The Stone-Campbell Movement*, 194.

47. Jim Cook, *The Myth of the Stone-Campbell Movement* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2019), 50–51.

commitment to Christian unity.⁴⁸ This provided a catalyst for Campbell to begin articulating his doctrine of God more explicitly in his writing, refuting the accusations of his opponents.

Campbell was challenged to articulate his Trinitarian theology. Foster quotes a statement from Campbell published in the *Millennial Harbinger* in 1839: “To deny the doctrine of the three names—of three relations—of three participants of the godhead is to deny the possibility of saving sinners.”⁴⁹ Campbell’s convictions had significant soteriological implications. The Son was not ontologically subordinate to the Father (as Stone suggested). Campbell approached the doctrine of the Trinity with rationality while conceding that there were constraints to fully comprehending the nature of God. In the *Millennial Harbinger* in 1846, he stated, “We have a manifestation of God out of humanity in the Father, of God in humanity in the Son, of God in humanity in the Holy Spirit.”⁵⁰ For Campbell there was a plurality of equal economy in the Godhead. Powell states, “It is clear for Campbell the basic vision of God that is articulated in the canonical heritage of the church is foundational for Christian faith.”⁵¹ Paul Blowers highlights Campbell’s aversion to language such as hypostasis but includes an excerpt from Campbell’s writing in the *Christian System* that communicates how he understood the nature of God: “We have in fact, but one God, one Lord, one Holy Spirit; yet these are

48. Foster, *A Life*, 237–38.

49. Foster, *A Life*, 102.

50. Foster et al., *Encyclopedia*, 357.

51. Mark E. Powell, “Canonical Theism and Theological Commitments in the Stone-Campbell Movement,” *Restoration Quarterly* 51 no. 4 (2009): 236.

equally possessed of one and the same divine nature.”⁵² Powell references this same quote in arguing this doctrine of God was required for Campbell, alongside his principles for interpreting Scripture, because this logic of those principles alone was not enough to make sense of the Christian narrative.⁵³

This is further illustrated by Alexander Campbell in the *Millennial Harbinger*. He is hesitant to be drawn into sectarian issues, including Trinitarianism. However, he uses the *Millennial Harbinger* multiple times to refute accusations of Unitarianism, Pluralism, and Arianism, among any other “ism” that might lend itself to another mode of sectarianism and thus subvert his ultimate quest for the unity of the church. In one of his responses to Unitarianism, he states, “In our Christian religion we have a ‘divine nature,’ and we have three persons—FATHER, the WORD and the HOLY SPIRIT.”⁵⁴ In another, he offers respect for the sake of union but also defends his Trinitarian views. “Trinitarianism, I say, is, to my mind, incomparably more rational and intelligible than this ‘one personal being,’ without habitation of a name known to mortals.”⁵⁵ He goes on to state his case for testifying to the divine nature of Jesus Christ. After affirming the pre-existence of Jesus, the Son of God, Campbell states that Jesus of Nazareth is “God manifest in the flesh.”⁵⁶ He continues to argue for the divine pre-existence, citing

52. Foster et al., *Encyclopedia*, 357.

53. Powell, “Canonical Theism,” 235.

54. Alexander Campbell, “Unitarianism as Connected with Christian Unity No. II,” *Millennial Harbinger III* July, no. 7 (1846): 393.

55. Alexander Campbell, “Unitarianism as Connected with Christian Unity No. III,” *Millennial Harbinger III* August, no. 7 (1846): 451.

56. Alexander Campbell, “Unitarianism as Connected with Christian Unity No. IV,” *Millennial Harbinger III* November, no. 11 (1846): 635.

multiple instances in Scripture where Jesus speaks of himself in relationship to the Father. Responding to yet another accusation of heresy, he states very plainly that the divinity of the “Lord Jesus is equal to, or one with the Father.”⁵⁷ Blowers makes an important point that will be explored further in the next section titled. He contends that “Campbell’s trinitarianism was dictated largely by his Christology.”⁵⁸

Following Campbell’s articulation of the plurality of God and equality of the three persons of the Godhead, the rest of this chapter will continue to explore the implications of orthodox Trinitarian theology for Churches of Christ in South Australia. The proposals set out in this discussion will further articulate an epistemology and praxis to be considered. In order to do this effectively, I will draw on contemporary voices reflecting on the resurgence of Trinitarian theology in the twentieth century and how it is being applied in the context of practicing theology today.

Perichoretic Trinitarianism

Biblical Evidence for Perichoresis

In the tradition of seeking truth and the revelation of God by attending to Scripture, it is important that some time is dedicated to understanding “where the Scriptures speak”⁵⁹ regarding Trinitarian proposals for a theological method. Having said

57. Alexander Campbell, “Dr. Alexander and My Unitarianism,” *Millennial Harbinger IV* April, no. 4 (1856): 234–35. Campbell also published letters that allowed others to come to his defence. For example, in connection with this accusation, a letter from James Challen references this letter and defends the integrity of Alexander Campbell, writing to Campbell, “I have never had occasion to doubt your sincere and intelligent belief in reference to the proper Divinity of our Lord Jesus Christ.” James Challen, “Our Unitarianism,” *Millennial Harbinger IV* May, no. 5 (1856): 293.

58. Foster et al., *Encyclopedia*, 357.

59. A famous phrase coined by Thomas Campbell, which is reflected in the epistemology of Alexander Campbell, is “where the Scriptures speak, we speak; where Scripture is silent, we are silent.” As problematic as this statement has been in the tradition of the movement, what it communicates is a

this, I am deeply aware of the temptation to read Scripture with a patternistic hermeneutic in search of theological propositions that match an agenda for this project.⁶⁰ I am pursuing what is considered to be an orthodox biblical perspective as presented by Campbell. He acknowledged that the term “Trinity” was not to be found in Scripture, a conclusion shared by Kärkkäinen and others. Kärkkäinen also argues for a Christological starting point for an exploration of Trinitarianism. He says that the early church’s understanding of the shared divinity between Jesus and the Father can help in the discernment of a more developed Trinitarian theology.⁶¹

Bishop Kallistos Ware speaks to the mystery of the otherness of God, which is difficult to define, and how our search makes us progressively aware of this mystery: “God is not so much the object of our knowledge as the cause of our wonder.”⁶² Adding to Campbell’s method of reason, I am advocating that the mystery of God cannot be fully defined, while appreciating that our continual study of Scripture may perpetually reveal this mystery to us.

I am drawn to John’s Gospel for this brief biblical survey, partly to reflect on how Campbell interacted with Johannine Christology in his doctrine of God but also to articulate my own theological convictions. My brief exploration of a doctrine of God in

commitment to Scripture as the authority by which we determine theological suppositions. It is the discipline that bypasses the creeds to seek what is at the heart of theological commitments.

60. Childers, Foster, and Reese, *The Crux*, 143. Childers, Foster, and Reese warn of “patternism,” a way of discarding portions of Scripture that appear irrelevant or inconvenient for a particular agenda. This is not my intention, but for the purposes of a brief examination of Scripture within this project, this needs to be acknowledged. Accordingly, they continue to outline a method for reading Scripture as a more helpful process for letting the Scriptures speak (pp. 149–67).

61. Kärkkäinen, *The Doctrine*, 46.

62. Bishop of Diokleia Kallistos, *The Orthodox Way* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2012), Kindle edition, ch. 1.

sections of John's Gospel provides a limited theology of the Trinity but will help frame what is already being asserted.

The unique prologue of the Fourth Gospel does not necessitate a birth narrative because the emphasis being communicated here is that the Son did not begin to exist only as he took on human form: "the Word" was with God in the beginning. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1 NRSV). The Word becoming flesh is an incarnating essence of God's eternal existence (John 1:14). According to Foster, Campbell's exposition of John 1:1 offered him language to differentiate between explicit Calvinistic doctrine and biblical revelation. While Barton Stone still accused Campbell of speculating on the mystery of the most important point of theology, Campbell's understanding of the Word becoming flesh was the revelation of the eternal, pre-existence of God.⁶³

John 3:16 also features in the debate regarding the relationship of the Son to the Father and the inequality of relationship suggested by the traditional translation of the word *monogenes*.⁶⁴ There is no room in this brief overview to fully explore the use of the term *monogenes* throughout Scripture,⁶⁵ but it needs to be stated that scholarship is divided over its usage etymologically, culturally, and theologically. Traditionally translated as "only begotten" to refer to the relationship between the Father and the Son, the implications of this phrase are that the Son is subordinate to the Father. In other

63. Foster, *A Life*, 235–36.

64. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son" (John 3:16 KJV). The word *monogenes* in the koine Greek was often translated "only begotten," but many contemporary translations no longer use the word "begotten." In fact, it has been dropped out completely to read "only Son."

65. The usage is diverse and has multiple cultural implications.

words, they are not equal, and it can be concluded that there was no pre-existence of the Son. A short essay written by Paul Peterson traces the origin of how *monogenes* was translated in a transition from Greek to Latin. What was accepted more widely by the early Fathers as “unique one” was altered and adopted as “only begotten” throughout the Western Church.⁶⁶ In the mid-twentieth century, Dale Moody argued for a correction in the “error” of this translation held for the past fifteen centuries. He argued for a greater “emphasis to the uniqueness of the deity of Jesus Christ.”⁶⁷ Zackary Dawson affirms Moody’s scholarship and agrees with the Christological significance of his conclusions. However, Dawson warns that etymological leveraging of words to assign theological agendas is fallacious.⁶⁸ Moody is arguing that its original meaning be reinstated. Kevin Giles also affirms Moody’s conclusion, stating that it has wide scholarly support and should be accepted.⁶⁹

Having acknowledged the challenges associated with this task and heeding the warning of imposing theological meaning and agendas, there is a broad consensus on the translation of *monogenes*. The “only Son” is the unique and divine *ousia* (essence) of God given of or revealed by God. Only God can reveal God, which ties John 3:16 back to

66. Paul Peterson, “Jesus—the ‘One and Only’ or ‘Only Begotten’: The Meaning of Monogenes,” in *Biblical and Theological Studies on the Trinity*, eds. Paul Petersen and Rob McIver (Hindmarsh, South Australia: ATF Press, 2013), 32–34.

67. Dale Moody, “God’s Only Son: The Translation of John 3:16 in the Revised Standard Version,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 72, no. 4 (1953): 213.

68. Zackary K. Dawson, “Monogenēs and the Social Trinity: A Test Case for Using Lexical Semantics in Systematic Theology,” *McMaster Journal of Theology and Ministry* 18 (2016): 33–35.

69. Kevin Giles, *The Eternal Generation of the Son: Maintaining Orthodoxy in Trinitarian Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012), 65–66. Accordingly, Giles states clearly that he has a bias in defending the doctrine of the eternal generation of the Son. However, he contrasts Arian arguments against his views and suggests that rather than focusing on the technicalities of an etymological agenda, the Scriptures affirm the theological premise of the eternally triune God (pp. 66–71).

the prologue.⁷⁰ Dawson highlights that since the relationship of the Father to the Son is established in the opening verses of John's Gospel, the use of the word *monogenes* in John 1:18 needs no further explanation.⁷¹ "It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known" (John 1:18).

Further examples of the relationality of the Trinity are revealed in John's Gospel as Jesus communicates his final commands to the disciples. The fourth evangelist weaves the relationship of the Father and the Son together abiding in love, which is the same love the disciples are invited to abide in and commanded to share with one another (John 15:9–17). John states clearly that there is no difference between the love of God expressed in the Son or the Father but that the Son acts as an intercessor for the Father. John introduces the enduring intercessor, the *paraclete*, who will take the place of the Son, being of the same essence as Christ (John 14:26; 16:7). The unfolding revelation of the Trinity culminates in Jesus's prayer for his disciples, in which the unity and oneness of the Godhead as introduced in John 1 and affirmed in John 3 are brought together as an example of how the disciples are to be united (John 17:20–26). This has eschatological and missiological significance as the unity of the Godhead expressed in the unity of the disciples reveals God's love for the world. The love of God as expressed in the community of God and reflected in the community of the disciples bears significance for how God is eternally revealed in the world.

70. Mary Shorter, "Light On/MONOGENĒS (Only-Begotten) in the Johannine Prologue," *Heythrop Journal* 49, no. 2 (2008): 283–91. Shorter offers helpful insights into the complexity of translating John 3:16, as well as provides some balanced perspectives.

71. Dawson, "Monogenēs," 46.

The emphasis for this biblical synopsis is on the Gospel of John, but that is not to minimize the significance of how God is revealed through the divinity of Christ in the synoptic Gospels with varying emphases. Examples of Triune language can also be acknowledged in the Apostle Paul's epistles. The opening of Paul's letter to the Romans is an even earlier account than the canonical gospels, referring to the divinity of the Son of God and the pre-existence of this "gospel of God" (Rom 5:1–5). Trinitarian acknowledgment is stated more explicitly with soteriological implications in Rom 5:1–5. Even greater clarity of Paul's Christology and doctrine of God is stated in Colossians, "For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily" (Col 2:9). The Apostle Paul's instruction to the Philippians in 2:5–11 further illustrates how the divinity of Jesus is understood in relationship to the Father. "Christ Jesus who, though was in the form of God, did not regard equality to be exploited, but emptied himself" (Phil 2:6–7). This is another example where the essence of God is expressed in the diversity and unique function of each person of the Trinity through *kenosis* (self-emptying). To be human, Christ chooses to relinquish power. This is not to deny any sense of the divine nature or Christ's pre-existence, but to highlight the dynamic of how God chooses to participate in life with humanity. Powell suggests the phrasing of this passage comes from an earlier hymn of confession of the church, indicating that belief in the divine equality of Jesus with the Father was a belief held by followers of Jesus from the beginning.⁷²

These are simply snapshots and examples of where New Testament references to the nature of God reveal a relationality of the three persons expressed in the Godhead.

72. Mark E. Powell, *Centered in God: The Trinity and Christian Spirituality* (Abilene, TX: Leafwood Publishers and ACU Press, 2014), 47–48.

Trinitarian theology in biblical scholarship is incredibly broad and continues to be an ongoing work. This is a simple orientation into a further exploration of the nature of God understood as Trinitarian, three interrelated unique persons of the same substance, equal and divine, as the true expression of God's love.

Perichoresis within Canonical Theism

The next part of this discussion requires understanding what is being suggested in the term "canonical theism." Highlighting William Abraham who is seminal in the development of the canonical theism project, I also incorporate Churches of Christ theologian, Mark Powell, who articulates a Trinitarian vision of God as for the "undivided church." Powell suggests there is widespread support across the diversity of Christian traditions for this vision of God. He further states that the heirs of the Stone-Campbell Movement ought to find in the canonical theism project a "loose unity in diversity" that will closely align an imitation of the early church with a commitment to Scripture and a credible, broadly accepted vision of God.⁷³ The basis for a "loose ecumenical unity" is at the heart of Churches of Christ polity.⁷⁴ Abraham suggests that epistemological proposals that form what is considered to be canon would need to be "decanonized if we are to secure the unity of Christians."⁷⁵ The proposal for a canonical theism offers a generally accepted theological foundation that has historical continuity,

73. Powell, "Canonical Theism," 238; Powell, *Centered in God*, 40–41.

74. Powell, "Canonical Theism," 227.

75. Abraham, "Canonical Theism: Thirty Theses," 7.

biblical integrity, and the possibility of broad acceptance within a diverse Christian tradition such as Churches of Christ.⁷⁶

Powell recognizes that his proposal for canonical theism as Trinitarian may not be easily accepted within the Restorationist tradition, where historical suspicion of defining a doctrine of God lingers. The attractive piece in Powell's proposal is that no specific epistemological or theological method should be adopted.⁷⁷ These methods are as restrictive as creeds and do not serve the agenda of a broad ecumenical posture for unity. Jason Vickers makes a distinction between ecclesial canons and epistemic criteria saying that appeals to ecclesial canon ought not to be a criterion of theological epistemology.⁷⁸

The argument for a Trinitarian canonical theism is broadly supported. Seamands names Karl Barth as the one who paved the way for a resurgence of interest in contemporary Trinitarian theology along with multiple twentieth-century theologians across traditions and cultures who have contributed to this ongoing work.⁷⁹ Kärkkäinen reflects on Catherine LaCugna's proposition that it is impossible for the persons of the Trinity to be disconnected from one another as they are of the same essence and God cannot exist without the full integration of the divine essence expressed in the three

76. Kärkkäinen provides some helpful orientation with a definition of classical theism. "It represents an effort to systematize, with the help of philosophical reasoning, the biblical teaching on God." Classical theism highlights a heritage of important developments in theological thinking in the Christian tradition. Kärkkäinen, *The Doctrine*, 55.

77. Powell makes a distinction that this is not the purpose of the canonical theism project, which can serve as a basis for loose ecumenical unity. Powell, "Canonical Theism," 230–32.

78. Vickers, "Canonical Theism," 157. Vickers also says, "When epistemic worries arise, Christian theologians can and should turn not to ecclesial canons but to relevant work in epistemology, i.e., to canons of rationality, justification, truth, and knowledge" (p. 157).

79. Seamands, *Ministry*, 16–17. Franke teases this out in more detail, bringing to light Barth's Christocentric focus in the biblical witness of the Trinity and the Christian confession that God is revealed in Jesus Christ. John R. Franke, *The Character of Theology: An Introduction to Its Nature, Task, and Purpose* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 61–65.

persons.⁸⁰ These are very brief acknowledgements of the breadth of more recent arguments for a broadly accepted canon of orthodox Trinitarianism, which I will continue to explore through the conceptual framework of *perichoresis* as an expression of the *imago Dei*.

Perichoresis is a term used to point to the activity of the Triune God as the dynamic inter-relationship of the Trinity. It is this dynamic of God who has a mission in the world and invites us to participate. The perichoretic mission is an intimate dance of the Trinity that creates a church as the people of God who respond to the dynamic activity of God in the world. *Perichoresis* by its very definition is an expression of the intimate dance of God's love expressed within Godself and poured out for humanity. It gives definition, expression, and purpose for the mission the church is invited to participate in. Brock Bingaman explores Jürgen Moltmann's conviction of the perichoretic dimension for the nature of the human vocation. Quoting Moltmann on the nature of *perichoresis*, he says this "is the only conceivable trinitarian concept of the unity of the triune God."⁸¹

Perichoresis in the Christian Tradition

This study has led me to briefly explore how John of Damascus (John Damascene) understood the nature of the Trinity, building on the Trinitarian theology of the Cappadocian Fathers.⁸² Bingaman describes Moltmann's understanding of John

80. Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *The Trinity: Global Perspectives* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007), 39.

81. Brock Bingaman, *All Things New: The Trinitarian Nature of the Human Calling in Maximus the Confessor and Jürgen Moltmann* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2014), 21.

82. Charles Twombly suggests that Damascene's work in "The Font of Knowledge," found within his broader writings, "The Orthodox Faith," is the principal location of the term *perichoresis*. He also argues that this work played a crucial role in the development of Barth and Moltmann's theologies. Charles

Damascene's *perichoresis* as the "circulatory character of the divine life, a dynamic activity that takes place through the exchange of energies."⁸³ With its origins in Cappadocian doctrine, *perichoresis* replaced the hierarchical doctrine of God.⁸⁴ Stephen Bevans affirms the origins of the term *perichoresis* in Damascene's theology describing the distinct yet blended nature of the triunity of God in a "free flowing, sometimes unpredictable modern dance."⁸⁵

Charles Twombly reflects on Damascene's writings to establish a scriptural basis for the knowledge of God as Trinity, further articulating the nature of God within this existence. The nature of God's hypostatic existence⁸⁶ in the Trinity means full revelation of God is dependent on each *hypostases*' revelation of the other.⁸⁷ Twombly argues, "Scripture authorized John to conclude, on the basis of revelation ... God is of one

C. Twombly, *Perichoresis and Personhood: God, Christ, and Salvation in John of Damascus* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2015), 1–4. Accordingly, Twombly references Barth's *Church Dogmatics*, saying that *perichoresis* is worked out in the Trinitarian theology shaping Barth's entire project. He also references Moltmann's "The Trinity and the Kingdom," suggesting that this idea of the Trinity shapes the basis of his ethics on equality, see footnotes pp. 6–7.

83. Bingaman, *All Things New*, 22.

84. Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God For Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), 270–71.

85. Stephen Bevans, "Reimagining God and Mission," in *Reimagining God and Mission*, ed. Ross Langmead (Adelaide, SA: ATF Press, 2007), 8. Respectively, Bevans goes on to articulate the relatability of the mysterious presence of God in the sending of the Spirit, declaring that it is Jesus who gives this mystery a human face thus revealing continuance of the perichoretic dance in human form (pp. 9–10).

86. "Ousia and hypostasis were widely regarded as having the same meaning; they were both used to identify the basic 'essence' or 'substance' underlying any particular existing entity or to refer to 'essence' or 'substance' in general." Twombly, *Perichoresis and Personhood*, 6.

87. Kärkkäinen, *The Doctrine*, 58–59. Kärkkäinen provides a more structured summary of Damascene's eighteen attributes of God. Twombly, *Perichoresis and Personhood*, 12–13. Twombly offers a helpful summary of how John of Damascus understands the nature of God as revealed through Scripture.

substance and in three persons.”⁸⁸ He goes on to argue that what binds the three is their co-existence in one another and mutual indwelling, best described as *perichoresis*.⁸⁹

Twombly complements the canonical theism project by stating that an agenda for John Damascene in a Trinitarian doctrine is the unifying of human thought.⁹⁰ Millard Erickson describes the term “God is love” through a perichoretic frame. For God to be love, there needs to be a subject and an object for love to be perfected. The interpenetration and relationality of the Triune God provides a perfect expression of unselfish love with a concern for the other.⁹¹ This has implications for mission and how the church is invited to participate in the perichoretic dance.

Eugene Peterson describes the perichoretic dance as being without confusion and in perfect rhythm.⁹² It is the framework for participating in the Christian life and how God moves from abstraction to being fully known.⁹³ Reflecting on LaCugna, Graham

88. Twombly, *Perichoresis and Personhood*, 20. Additionally, Bingaman highlights that, following Damascene’s lead, Moltmann draws the same conclusions about the Trinity. Bingaman, *All Things New*, 22.

89. Twombly, *Perichoresis and Personhood*, 32.

90. Twombly, *Perichoresis and Personhood*, 34. Kärkkäinen affirms this in the work of Moltmann and Millard Erickson, who reference John Damascene in establishing the unity, permanence, and interdependence of the Triune God. Kärkkäinen also highlights that Erickson supports a biblical basis for *perichoresis* and that for Erickson, “the incarnation is the most complete revelation of the Trinity.” Kärkkäinen, *The Trinity*, 222–23.

91. Millard J. Erickson, *Making Sense of the Trinity: Three Crucial Questions* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2000), 58–61. Powell also illustrates this well by reflecting on Rublev’s icon of the Trinity and the mutual interdependence of the divine community of love. Powell, *Centered in God*, 39–40.

92. Eugene H. Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places: A Conversation in Spiritual Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 45. Peterson offers a literal translation for *perichoresis* as *peri* = around; *coresis* = dance. He plays with the idea of a “dance around” as a perfectly choreographed rhythm.

93. Peterson, *Christ Plays*, 44–46.

Buxton argues that the perichoretic dance is “ecstatic, relational, dynamic and vital.”⁹⁴

Buxton acknowledges *perichoresis* as a theological model for unity that is inclusive, embracing, and advocating of equality. This has social and practical implications.

Perichoresis is not an abstract theory but invites practical participation in God’s salvific and liberating mission.⁹⁵ LaCugna argues that *perichoresis* brings into focus a personal relationship with God whereas other Trinitarian images can be too abstract.⁹⁶

Franke articulates *perichoresis* as the persons of the Godhead distinct from one another but also bound together in such a way that they share in a self-sacrificing, self-giving love.⁹⁷ He goes on to describe how this love is expansive to include others. This is the premise of a missional vocation for God’s people: the dynamic dance of the perichoretic love of God includes us. Andrew Root, with the same recognition of the hypostasis of the Triune God, describes God as minister to us. This requires a surrendering to the divine action of God’s love shared with us. When we die to self and take up our life in Christ, we are participating in the dance of God’s self-sacrificing love. This is the basis of praxis. God’s eternal and continuous action, revealed in Christ, with our participation forms the cycle of the perichoretic dance of missional vocation.⁹⁸

94. Graham Buxton, *The Trinity, Creation and Pastoral Ministry: Imaging the Perichoretic God* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2005), 122.

95. Buxton, *The Trinity*, 121–23. Graham Hill also explores the breadth of LaCugna engagement across Western and Eastern theologies and argues for a redemptive and missional economy of salvation expressed in Trinitarian doctrine. Graham Hill, *Salt, Light, and a City: Ecclesiology for the Global Missional Community: Volume 1, Western Voices*, 2nd ed. (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2017), 15–17.

96. Speaking of the eternal, reciprocal movement of God, LaCugna invites us to contemplate *perichoresis* as “God being alive from all eternity as love.” LaCugna, *God For Us*, 271–72.

97. Franke, *Missional Theology*, 16–17.

98. Andrew Root, *Christopraxis: A Practical Theology of the Cross* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2014), 72–79. Root does not use the term *perichoresis*, but his reflections on Kathleen Cahalan’s and Karl Barth’s Trinitarian theologies offer helpful insights.

Buxton helps to describe the nature of God's sacrificial love through Moltmann's theology of the cross. He says that the perichoretic relationality creates a paradigm shift from hierarchical to relational theology. It is within this reality that we are invited to participate in the *missio Dei*.⁹⁹

Perichoresis offers substance to the nature of mission as expressed through Churches of Christ. In all its theological diversity, the movement locates its continuity in a Christological confession that Jesus is Lord. Franke suggests that even though there is broad diversity in the plurality of the church, this reflects the essential continuity of the Christian tradition.¹⁰⁰ This tradition reflects the plurality of the Trinity as revealed in the Scriptures.

A Theological Proposal for the Nature of Mission

The ideas of *perichoresis* and the perichoretic dance contained within canonical theism have practical implications for the church's understanding of the nature of mission. Exploring the participation of the church in the continuity of God's eschatological activity in the world, Moltmann states, "It is not the church that has a mission of salvation to fulfill; it is the mission of the Son and the Spirit through the Father that includes the church, creating a church as it goes on its way."¹⁰¹ Moltmann communicates the dynamic of the inter-relationality of the Trinity and the dependence of the church on this dynamic for its missional vocation. Moltmann also asserts that there is no church without this missional dynamic. It is the mission of the Triune God that brings

99. Buxton, *The Trinity*, 114. See also pp. 112–19 for further reference.

100. Franke, *Missional Theology*, 151.

101. Jürgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit: A Contribution to Messianic Ecclesiology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 64.

the church into existence and invites their ongoing participation.

David Bosch highlights a dilemma for the Christian church by affirming Moltmann's assertion that the mission originates with God and not the church. Over time, in Bosch's view, mission has become something conceived of by the church (particularly in the West) as its own activity.¹⁰² I share this concern. Observations from my ministry context indicate that congregations are so invested in their own activity that they have overlooked exactly whose activity they participate in. Bosch argues for a change of focus from "a theology of mission" to "a missionary theology," highlighting the deficits within Enlightenment influence in the discipline of theology and, as encouraged by Friedrich Schleiermacher in particular, creating sub-disciplines such as practical theology.¹⁰³ This separation has not been helpful for the church in practice. A reorientation suggested by Bosch is for the church to understand itself as missionary by its very nature because God is missionary by nature. If the mission of the Triune God creates a church, then the church, by its very nature, reflects the character of God.¹⁰⁴ The vocation of the church is to signpost declarations of God's eschatological reign occurring now and in a hoped-for future.¹⁰⁵

Franke argues that the challenge for the church today is to embody a missionary theology, that is, to become the gospel.¹⁰⁶ Like Moltmann and Bosch, Darrell Guder says

102. David Jacobus Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 390.

103. Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 489–98.

104. Franke, *Missional Theology*, 32. Franke states that the *missio Dei* is an outward expression of the nature of the Trinity, thus the church must be missionary.

105. Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 35.

106. Franke, *Missional Theology*, 34–35.

that this reorientation of theological imagination ought to restructure our ecclesiology.¹⁰⁷ By definition, a missional church ought to be as dynamic as the perichoretic dance of the Trinity that creates it. The church is an evolving organism responding to the agency of God at work in the world. This will push against every instinct of the church in Western context, as ecclesial structures are generally concerned with the survival of the institution. This is the reality Churches of Christ congregations in South Australia need to grapple with. Franke proposes a shift away from mission as a program that serves the church to the church that is sent by the mission of God.¹⁰⁸ If this proposal were to be taken seriously, it would set a profoundly different agenda for the existence of the church.

“Mission is connected with nothing less than the completion of all God has begun to do in the creation of the world and of humankind.”¹⁰⁹ In saying this, Leslie Newbigin firmly assigns the origin and purpose of mission. Brian Macallan explores Newbigin’s Trinitarian framework for mission, stating that it is the proclamation of God’s reign sharing in the Trinitarian life of Christ and bearing witness to the Spirit.¹¹⁰ The important piece I will draw on here is that the church’s witness is secondary to the witness of the Spirit.¹¹¹ Mission as witness means that the church has no mission if not for the role of the Spirit who precedes it. Macallan highlights that the implication of the social,

107. Darrell L. Guder, ed., *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 6.

108. Franke, *The Character*, 68–72.

109. Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 56.

110. Brian Macallan, “Trinitarian Mission and Practical Theology: Conversations in Service of the Local,” *International Review of Mission* 108, no. 2 (2019): 392–94. Macallan’s paper, presented to the World Council of Churches, is a helpful summary of chapter four of his thesis, “Postfoundationalist Reflections in Practical Theology.”

111. Macallan, “Trinitarian Mission,” 394.

missional God (*perichoresis*) is that the church must be missional. The implications of the theological framework I am suggesting are that the nature of mission, for the church in particular, invites a surrendering and relinquishing posture.

The canonical heritage of the church continues to unfold in the perichoretic dance as God's mission creates a church in local contexts. This dynamic informs a canonical theism and provides a solid foundation for Churches of Christ in South Australia and the revitalization of its mission. The nature of engaging in theological discernment within this proposal is the ongoing discovery of the mystery of God. In this dynamic task of practicing theology, the dance reveals to us more of the nature of God and mission as we participate. Through this participation, ecclesiological structures cannot remain static but must evolve and submit to the agenda of God's mission. This proposal is not restrictive to an epistemic or theological theory but probes a conversation that is considered broadly ecumenical and missionally dynamic within the discipline of canonical theism.

Informing a Missional Imagination

I have been building a case for understanding the image of God through the use of the term *perichoresis*. I am suggesting this as the basis for stimulating a theological imagination that revitalizes the nature of mission for Churches of Christ in South Australia. My point of reference is developed out of the theological convictions of one of the movement's founders, Alexander Campbell, who argued for an orthodox appreciation of the inter-relationship of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. I have built on this by drawing on limited aspects of the Christian tradition in which Trinitarian theology has developed.

Theological principles and ecclesiological practices have endured through the

movement in South Australia and are reflected in the core practices of Churches of Christ today. However, these are implied to be inherited traditions rather than engaged as a dynamic conversation for how God is forming Churches of Christ now. The theological principles that inform the movement's beliefs and practices position the movement well for a revitalization of its participation in mission. George Hunsberger indicates that there is an underdeveloped application of Trinitarian approaches to mission, which has implications for ecclesiological formation.¹¹² The Trinity is an image that reveals the characteristics of healthy relationships that build community for the purpose of joining with the perichoretic missional vocation.¹¹³

Mission is not the program of the church, it is the activity of God in which the church is invited to participate. Working harder at programmatic responses will not revitalize the church. It is the mission of the Triune God that creates and shapes a church. I am advocating for a reimagining of ecclesial structures and practices. Ross Langmead reflects this in his introductory chapter "Reimagining God and Mission in Australia." Like Macallan, he advocates for a local theology that brings into conversation our evolving cultural context and heritage with how God has been and is continuing to be understood, which causes us to reimagine our participation in mission.¹¹⁴ It is important

112. Guder, *Missional Church*, 82.

113. The dominant cultural trend of individualism in the Western context inhibits this work. Seamands argues that a major paradigm shift is required to correct a widely held notion that the Christian faith is a private matter. Seamands, *Ministry*, 35–39.

114. Ross Langmead "Reimagining God and Mission in Australia," in *Reimagining God and Mission*, ed. Ross Langmead (Adelaide, SA: ATF Press, 2007), vii–xxiii. It needs to be acknowledged that Langmead spends some time exploring the dominance of a God in the image of European settlement, which is alien to indigenous Australians, and advocates for a greater awareness of listening into all the historical and cultural frames that inform missional perspectives in Australia.

we start with God in our context rather than seeking solutions to institutional survival.¹¹⁵

Common practices of Churches of Christ, such as the weekly practice of sharing communion and believers' baptism by immersion, incorporate the eschatological announcement and possibility of the agency of God that brings about transformation. These are important to explore in the context of a movement that is captivated by the modernistic imagination of reliance on human agency. Craig Van Gelder warns that to advocate a position that starts with the mission of God over the mission of the church, one needs to have a robust Trinitarian theology.¹¹⁶ I have stated a case for exploring God's agency as the author and initiator of mission. An exploration of God's agency will tease this imagination further.

Understanding God's Agency in Mission

The church by its very nature is missionary, which means everything of the church—its presence, its activity, and its very being—is informed by the mission of God.¹¹⁷ The activity of God invites God's people into a formational journey of embodying God's kingdom in our midst. Guder offers a helpful reorientation of mission as being derived from the nature of the Triune God, not a doctrine of ecclesiology. As the Father sends the Son and the Spirit, the Trinity sends the church.¹¹⁸

115. "Questions about being the church are, in Newbigin's books, secondary to and follow from the questions of a missional engagement of Scripture with the cultural context in which we are located." Alan J. Roxburgh, *Missional: Joining God in the Neighborhood* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2011), 42–43.

116. Craig Van Gelder and Dwight J. Zscheile, *The Missional Church in Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 69.

117. Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *An Introduction to Ecclesiology: Historical, Global, and Interreligious Perspectives*, rev. and exp. ed. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2021), 165.

118. Guder, *Missional Church*, 4–5.

The church embodies the mission of God as the sent ones. However, the legacy of Christendom has structured the church in such a way that mission is one of its many programs. The flexibility of the dynamic of God to shape an ecclesiology in response to mission is stifled by this imposition. The missional church is one of the outcomes of the agency of God. God's mission births a church, and this mission will forever be the catalyst that guides and informs its trajectory. The Triune God, then, nourishes and sustains it.

Therefore, Christ followers who populate the church have a vocation to be on mission in their particular social, historical, and cultural context.¹¹⁹ The church vocationally reflects the *perichoresis* of the Trinity, a mutual interdependence in which the church is completely dependent on the provision of God in fulfilling the mission. God seeks the participation of the church to embody this dynamic. The missional church takes shape in time and space as a response. It is always expressed within a context and reflects the discernment of God's people to embody God's mission in such a way that is faithful to the mission and makes sense in context. This provides a challenge to any ecclesiology framed within a structure that is static and has been transported through time and space.

A critical element in being obedient to the missional call is the church's own understanding and confidence in the story of God and the trajectory of that mission. Wright summarizes that the Apostles understood clearly the dynamic thrust of the story and their place in it, "participating in the last great act as God's co-workers."¹²⁰ This establishes a sense of urgency among the people of God and a depth of understanding

119. Franke, *Missional Theology*, 19.

120. Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God's People: A Biblical Theology of the Church's Mission* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 47.

that it is not simply the story of the local church they are participating in, but in a much larger story of God's kingdom emerging. Kärkkäinen provides a helpful summary of principles that guide the activity of a missional church. These include bearing witness to the good news about Jesus, participating in healing and restoration, promoting social justice and equality, and engaging in reconciliation and peace building.¹²¹

Reflecting on Luke 10:1–12, the invitation from God and the response of the church is evident. The people of God are sent ones into places where the dynamic of God is already manifesting.¹²² The sent ones have a simple confession: to proclaim the nearness of God's kingdom. It is through the authority given by Jesus that this proclamation is made, regardless of the response. This is a confession that bears witness to an encounter with God's kingdom. This witness is supported by bringing healing and restoration into the lives of the people they encounter and being people of peace who find other people of peace on their pilgrimage through the community. The missional church reflected in this text is a sojourning community who rely solely on the provision of God and the hospitality of strangers.

The announcement by Jesus in Luke 4:18–19 sets the foundation for the work of social justice, liberation, and equality. It has far-reaching consequences for the church to take seriously that it is not the center of power. This mission statement invites the church to divest itself of power for the sake of the other. Liberation of those on the margins of society is part of the call, but equality is a significant step further. Reflected by

121. Kärkkäinen, *An Introduction*, 169.

122. Roxburgh, *Missional*, 133–48. Roxburgh dedicates a significant portion of his “Part 3” to a reflection on the Luke 10:1–12 narrative, proposing practices based on key themes in the text that he suggests propel the church to move into neighborhoods in more intentional ways, creating a significant culture shift in the way we “be” the church and reorienting how the church engages in mission.

Newbigin's call to authentic expressions of the Gospel in someone's own culture and language, equality carries with it a freedom of authentic expression. The desire of the Triune God is to reconcile all of creation as well as mend the broken bonds within what has been created. The work of the church is to participate in the bridge building of reconciliation so that, by their presence, the peace of God reigns.

God's mission initiates a church and transforms ecclesial structures as the people of God continue the work of discerning their identity in response to this mission. As the world evolves, so does the mission of God, responding to the possibility of the restoration of all things. The missional church proclaims and embodies this dynamic hope.

Scripture tells us that it is God who initiates transformative action.¹²³ Andrew Root contributes to this discussion, contending that the cross signifies the end of human action and amplifies the activity of God as a dynamic agency reforming the church today. Root says that "all human action, all practice, needs to face its impossibility."¹²⁴ It is not until we face our own fallibility that the possibility of God's agency creates a future. To this end, the vitality of Churches of Christ and its missional nature cannot be accessed by human will alone. Root says that possibility can come only through the actuality of Godself as Trinity.¹²⁵ The fullness of the expression of God's love and ministry to us further communicates the eschatological hope for the church as participants in God's mission.

123. God makes dry bones live again (Ezek 37:1–14). It is God who incarnates (John 1:14). It is God who resurrects (Mark 16:6; Matt 28:5; Luke 24:5–7). It is God who enables the activity of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:4). It is God who makes everything new (Rev 21:5).

124. Root, *Christopraxis*, 16.

125. Root, *Christopraxis*, 141.

Alan Roxburgh and Martin Robinson refer to human agency as a modernistic subjective response to whatever is tangible within human effort for the sake of doing good works to serve the community.¹²⁶ They refer to “modernity’s wager” as a construct within which “life can be lived to the full through human autonomy without God’s agency.”¹²⁷ Mark Lau Branson and Roxburgh explore modernity’s wager further through Charles Taylor’s lens of the modern social imaginary. This social imaginary is one that repositions God from the primary agent in the world to merely being useful to the new project of human imagination.¹²⁸ The reimagining I propose through *perichoresis* reorients how Churches of Christ congregations understand and participate in mission.

Understanding God’s agency requires engagement with liminality. Branson and Roxburgh suggest developing a theology of the “space-between.”¹²⁹ The space-between is necessary for the transition between the known and the not yet realized as it creates opportunity for formation and preparation for what is to come. Realizing the world has changed and the old methods do not work anymore creates anxiety. Rather than developing more programs, liminality anticipates the revelation of God’s activity. Churches of Christ as a movement need to yield to what wants to emerge, surrendering to the inevitability of our changed reality.¹³⁰

126. Alan Roxburgh and Martin Robinson, *Practices for the Refounding of God’s People: The Missional Challenge of the West* (New York: Church Publishing, 2018), 99.

127. Roxburgh and Robinson, *Practices*, 36.

128. Mark Lau Branson and Alan J. Roxburgh, *Leadership, God’s Agency, and Disruptions: Confronting Modernity’s Wager* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2020), 40.

129. Branson and Roxburgh, *Leadership*, 143.

130. Beaumont, *How to Lead*, 45.

To avoid being another pawn in modernity's wager, liminality allows for the dance of "relationality and creativity in the space-between."¹³¹ We hold our need for control and plans for the future lightly and make room for an encounter with God. God's mission begins to transform us. An example of this is offered in the Acts 10 story of Peter's encounter with Cornelius. God's initiative invites Peter into a mission not of his own making and also educates Peter about a new thing God is doing; then Peter, himself, has a conversion experience, which has consequences for Christian practices in table fellowship.

Acts 10 illustrates that being faithful to the leading of God's agency expands the church's awareness of God's mission and how that can transform the sent ones. Guder references Peter's experience in his discussion about cultural translation and the ongoing conversion of the church, saying that "missionary translation always includes the continuing conversion of the translator-evangelists."¹³² This dynamic of God, continuing to create, shape, and transform God's people to be the missional church, is what offers hope in the midst of stagnating ecclesial structures and programmatic approaches to mission. The literature reflects that the church faces an ongoing hermeneutical challenge of cultural translation, which ought to include ongoing conversion as they participate with God's mission. The task of translation, Guder says, begins with God's self-revelation.¹³³

131. Branson and Roxburgh, *Leadership*, 54.

132. Darrell L. Guder, *Continuing Conversion of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 89.

133. Guder, *Continuing Conversion*, 87.

Church leaders relying on their own innovations in my ministry context have failed in the past and will do so again. Creating space allows room for discernment, which is to develop an awareness and relationship with the perichoretic dance. This can lead to an appreciation for a discovery of God in the “space-between” so we may be led to a new future that is not purely of our own construction.¹³⁴

Understanding the agency of God through our practices can inform and revitalize possibility beyond what we can do for ourselves. Just as I have been arguing for an orthodoxy of Trinitarian theology to underpin our theological framework, LaCugna suggests that orthopraxis helps orient our “right practice” in response to our theological discernment.¹³⁵ The agency of God in our midst invites us to reimagine the vocation of Churches of Christ congregations in South Australia and ecclesiological functionality in response to missional possibility. Six core aspects in Churches of Christ polity will now be presented for reimagining missional vitality.

Reimagining Scripture

A central commitment for Churches of Christ congregations is to interpret Scripture faithfully. Robert Cornwell makes an important distinction between personal freedom to interpret Scripture and corporate responsibility to inform theological perspectives. “We ultimately decide what we believe ‘for ourselves,’... but we do not decide what we believe ‘by ourselves.’”¹³⁶ He advocates for a posture of respectfully

134. Branson and Roxburgh, *Leadership*, 55.

135. Catherine Mowry LaCugna, “The Practical Trinity,” *The Christian Century* 22, no. 109 (1992): 682.

136. Robert D. Cornwell, *Freedom in Covenant: Reflections on the Distinctive Values and Practices of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2015), 14.

listening to one another, especially when diversity of opinion brings about discomfort, because this discipline is what helps bring about unity in Christ and revelation of the word of God.

Freedom from the shackles of the creeds does not give license for the pursuit of individualistic agendas within the Christian faith. Coming to Scripture together to discover the word of God is a discipline in inviting the mystery of God to illuminate the Christian community. This was Alexander Campbell's intent. Throughout the Christian tradition, Scripture has led people to discover more of the nature, character, and mystery of God.

In part, my proposal for reimagining Scripture is to engage it less as a personal self-help book or a resource to push personal agendas and more as a source of communal revelation where we discover God together. Reimagining our approach to Scripture reorients the missional nature of the church.

Reimagining Unity

The Stone-Campbell Movement is paradoxically a unity movement of autonomous congregations. Reese warns that the desire to separate is embedded within the DNA of the movement.¹³⁷ Freedom of expression creates tension between differences of opinion. Reese reflects on Barton Stone's writing about true unity, naming four different types of union: book, head, water, and fire.¹³⁸ Campbell's methods to move towards unity are located primarily in the head and water union. This is evident as the

137. Reese, *At the Blue Hole*, 245.

138. Reese, *At the Blue Hole*, 241–43. Reese discusses the types of union: union through creeds and confessions (book), union through knowledge of Scripture (head), union through baptism by immersion (water), and union through the Holy Spirit (fire).

Union of Churches of Christ congregations in South Australia were sectarian as it emerged into the twentieth century. Through the mid-twentieth century, Churches of Christ began to shift significantly in the direction of ecumenical cooperation.

Unity is not another word for *conformity*. “Fire union,” as Reese states, is a movement of the Spirit of God to work within the life of the Christian church.¹³⁹ This is where I draw on *perichoresis* as the model for unity. To reimagine unity, we must reimagine our theology within the Trinitarian framework. The mutual indwelling and interdependence of the Trinity’s self-giving and self-sacrificing of love embraces the church in this dance. The mystery of the perichoretic dance issues an invitation to participate in the unity of God. God’s project is to continue uniting the Christian church.

By reimagining the plea for Christian unity as an activity of the Triune God, the nature of our missional posture is to be open and receptive. We are receptive to the revelation of God through Scripture, and we are also receptive to the revelation of God through others in ecumenical dialogue. This is how we appreciate the breadth of diversity. We can find our unity within diversity through the proposed canonical theism because it holds a space for ecumenical dialogue across the breadth of the canonical heritage of the church where something of the character and nature of God can generally be accepted. Graham Hill highlights Moltmann’s Trinitarian fellowship of the Spirit as an argument for the relinquishment of things that divide for the sake of the pursuit of unity

139. Reese, *At the Blue Hole*, 243.

in the Spirit in which diversity is still respected.¹⁴⁰ Ultimately, “our witness is to God’s wholeness.”¹⁴¹

Reimagining Autonomy

There is a growing misunderstanding that congregational autonomy within the Churches of Christ in South Australia means full independence and essentially isolationism. In an environment where the Christian church is struggling for relevance in society, congregations cannot afford to isolate from one another. In a Churches of Christ theological journal article, Greg Elsdon attempts to correct this rhetoric by establishing first that this was not the intention of the movement’s founders in their move away from the structures of established religion. He believes that the intention of the founders, which should be the ongoing work of Churches of Christ, is to “work with characteristic vigor for the rediscovery of a lively interdependence and mutuality.”¹⁴²

In reimagining autonomy, the image of *perichoresis* invites us to consider mutuality and interdependence in the Christian community. Indifference will not serve the mission of God. Elsdon highlights the presumption that the Apostle Paul’s epistles advocate for interdependent mutuality within the body of Christ.¹⁴³ The image of the body of Christ is not an exclusive model for a single congregation but for the whole Christian church. Participating in this image of the church is a healthy posture for Churches of Christ congregations to reflect towards one another. “If one member suffers,

140. Hill, *Salt, Light, and a City*, 110.

141. Cornwell, *Freedom*, 39.

142. Greg Elsdon, “Congregational Autonomy: Bane or Blessing?” *REO: A Journal of Theology and Ministry*, no. 12 (1999): 12. Elsdon writes as the Principal of the Churches of Christ Theological College in a journal distributed to Churches of Christ across Australia.

143. Elsdon, “Congregational Autonomy,” 13–16.

all suffer with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice with it” (1 Cor 12:26). The Apostle Paul offers an image for the church in which we find our mutual indwelling in the Spirit of unity and mutual edification of one another for the sake of God’s mission.

Reimagining the Lord’s Supper

The practice of breaking bread as an observance of the Lord’s Supper is an act of remembrance. It is also a gesture of surrendering to the agency of God. In a lecture presented to a Churches of Christ gathering in South Australia, Merryl Blair suggested that the gathering of God’s people around the table of the Lord is where people are formed and transformed for participation in God’s mission.¹⁴⁴ Each time the church participates in this practice, it is a prophetic announcement of possibility. When people regularly gather around a table that is designed to draw us together as the body of Christ, we are reminded whose we are and that we are sent to proclaim and embody the possibilities of God’s kingdom emerging. The Lord’s Supper communicates our desire to participate in the *missio Dei*. It is the context for preparing and sending God’s people into the world.

Reimagining the Lord’s Supper brings focus to the hospitality of Christ as host. Reta Halteman Finger argues that the table fellowship practices of Jesus were to welcome everyone to the table.¹⁴⁵ Hill also highlights Moltmann’s vision of the messianic meal and participation in the messianic way of life through eschatological and missional practices

144. Merryl Blair, “People Formed and Transformed around the Table of the Lord,” (G. R. Stirling Lecture, Tabor College, Adelaide, South Australia, October 13, 2016). Merryl was the visiting lecturer from Stirling Theological College invited to reflect on her work in an ecumenical conversation between the Disciples of Christ and the Roman Catholic Church in North America over the past two decades.

145. Hill, *Salt, Light, and a City*, 129.

such as the Lord's Supper as a way of promoting a dynamic ecclesiology.¹⁴⁶ Our participation in communion as a central function of our worship gatherings transforms us as participants in everyday table fellowship where Christ is also host. The perichoretic dance continues at all tables.

The Lord's Supper is such a central practice to the life of Churches of Christ congregations in South Australia, it is fitting to reimagine it in the context of participating in God's mission. Firstly, as Kärkkäinen suggests, the "open table," which has been more broadly supported across Churches of Christ since participating in more ecumenical dialogue, should be open to all Christians who desire fellowship with the Lord.¹⁴⁷ Secondly, as suggested by Robinson and Roxburgh, the Lord's Supper is the primary context for the refounding of God's people as a eucharistic community who participate in the agency of God, bearing witness to God's mission through acts of hospitality and sharing life together.¹⁴⁸ Participation in the Lord's Supper bears ecclesiological significance for Churches of Christ in South Australia as it represents participating in the eschatological vocation of the church being transformed by God's mission.

Reimagining Baptism

In the history of the movement, baptism by immersion has been a contentious and divisive subject. I have already highlighted evidence of sectarian behavior in the earlier years of Churches of Christ in South Australia in their refusal to associate with the "unimmersed." There are a number of reasons why this is an unhelpful dogmatic position

146. Hill, *Salt, Light, and a City*, 108–9.

147. Kärkkäinen, *An Introduction*, 221.

148. Roxburgh and Robinson, *Practices*, 161–64.

to take. This includes our revitalized ecumenical posture advocating participation with the broader Christian church (including the fact that congregations are ecumenical by nature) and the proposal for an open table where Christ hosts a place for all regardless of the context of their confession of faith. I will narrow this focus to an issue that remains evident in Churches of Christ congregations: the term “Christians in fellowship.”

Christians in fellowship is a way of naming those who have joined in with the life of a congregation in Churches of Christ in South Australia who have not been baptized by immersion. Stirling likens this terminology to calling this group of Christians “second class Christians.”¹⁴⁹ While this rule around baptism by immersion is still written into church constitutions, some congregations have made allowances for recognition of equal membership without requiring this form of baptism (though baptism by immersion is still listed as the primary form for confessing faith in Jesus Christ). Is the argument for Christians in fellowship still warranted?

John Mark Hicks and Greg Taylor offer a helpful summary of Alexander Campbell’s thinking on the matter of baptism. Though Campbell had strong views on the biblical mandate for baptism by immersion, he ultimately saw the practice as a means of grace for the confessing believer.¹⁵⁰ Though Campbell’s preference was for people to follow the instruction of the New Testament (even re-baptizing those who experienced pedo-baptism), Campbell preferred the desire of the heart of a disciple over ritual.¹⁵¹ This leniency on the act of baptism has caused elements of the movement to reconsider the

149. Stirling, *Churches of Christ*, 54.

150. John Mark Hicks and Greg Taylor, *Down in the River to Pray: Revisioning Baptism as God’s Transforming Work*, rev. ed. (Abilene, TX: Leafwood Publishers, 2013), Kindle edition, ch.7.

151. Hicks and Taylor, *Down in the River*, ch.7.

requirement in light of growing ecumenical dialogue. Cornwell reflects that the Disciples of Christ have regarded it inappropriate to require re-baptism and invite open membership and participation in the life of the church.¹⁵² Hicks and Taylor make room for this, indicating that for Campbell the transformed life in the image of Christ and the character of the believer were more important than a command for ritual.¹⁵³ “Campbell did not devalue the faith of the unimmersed, but called the unimmersed to the assurance that God gives through a more biblical practice of baptism.”¹⁵⁴ Powell, Hicks, and McKinzie talk about baptism as a “communal experience of God,” a visible sign of unity and commitment to follow Jesus.¹⁵⁵ It is a public rehearsal of the redemptive story of God in the life of discipleship¹⁵⁶ and bears witness to God’s mission.¹⁵⁷

Reimagining baptism has some practical considerations for Churches of Christ in South Australia. It ought to still bear significance in the life of the church. Each baptismal candidate is participating in the rehearsal of the drama of the perichoretic dance in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. It is a witness to the church’s participation in God’s mission. Yet it ought not be an imposition. The invitation to participate in the dance through baptism is at the heart of our practice, but it does not

152. Cornwell, *Freedom*, 50.

153. Hicks and Taylor, *Down in the River*, ch.7.

154. Hicks and Taylor, *Down in the River*, ch.7.

155. Powell, Hicks, and McKinzie, *Discipleship*, 134.

156. Romans 6:1–11 symbolises dying to the old life and being raised again into a new life in Christ.

157. Powell, Hicks, and McKinzie, *Discipleship*, 128–31. Here they offer six components for a baptismal liturgy that bears witness to the activity of God in the life of discipleship.

exclude our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ from fully participating in the life of the church.

Reimagining Participation

“There can be no biblically based theology of mission and witness which does not emphasize the centrality of the ‘called out people’ for that mission.”¹⁵⁸ Guder speaks into the heart of what I want to highlight for reimagining the participation of all believers in ministry. Often referred to as the “priesthood,” all are encouraged to participate in ministry, leadership, and the administering of sacraments in the life of the church.

“Ministry is something every Christian is ordained for in baptism.”¹⁵⁹ In the life of the church, everyone participates equally. Where other traditions may refer to the laity, Churches of Christ do not make the same distinction between clerical roles and the roles of others. All are invited to participate in Christ. However, the temptation is to view this participation without accountability. In contrast, each individual member, grafted into the body of Christ, is grafted into a community of mutual accountability reflecting the nature of *perichoresis*.

Further exploring *perichoresis* in the life of the church, Graham Buxton reflects on some limitations highlighted by Trinitarian theologians. One of the most important things Buxton notes is that humans do not participate in the life of God in the same way the members of the Trinity dwell in one another. The perichoretic dance means “the indwelling of other persons is exclusively the prerogative of God.”¹⁶⁰ The dynamic of the

158. Guder, *Continuing Conversion*, 68.

159. Cornwell, *Freedom*, 57.

160. Graham Buxton, *Dancing in the Dark: The Privilege of Participating in God’s Ministry in the World* rev. ed. (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2016), 273–74.

agency of God in *perichoresis* is the only hope the church has in participating in a vocation of any meaning. LaCugna says, “The heart of Christian faith is the encounter with the God of Jesus who makes possible both our union with God and communion with each other.”¹⁶¹ Any expression of the church joining God’s mission is predicated by the possibility of God, not simply our own will. This brings us into union with God’s purpose.

Two more important ecclesiological aspects need to be acknowledged for participation. First, as LaCugna expresses at the heart of her doctrine of the Trinity, there is no subordination, inequality, or hierarchy. “Communion in the Spirit of God means that all persons, while irreducibly unique, exist together as equal partners in Christ.”¹⁶² This reflects *perichoresis*, communicating the image of God in which we are invited to participate and functionally reflect in the life of the church. Secondly, Buxton urges believers to rethink the separation of worship and mission. Participating in the ministry of all believers is not limited to a task performed in worship; neither is worship isolated from our concern for the world around us nor the call to participate with God in it. Buxton draws on Moltmann to affirm the privilege each believer has in participating in the prophetic ministry that emerges out of their gathering.¹⁶³ Sacraments invite the people of God to surrender to being restored in God’s image. Liturgies inform and send us to participate in God’s mission. Participation in worship is inextricably intertwined with the revelation of and participation with the perichoretic dance of God’s activity in the world.

161. LaCugna, “The Practical Trinity,” 679.

162. LaCugna, “The Practical Trinity,” 682.

163. Buxton, *Dancing*, 159–60.

In reimagining participation, practices in worship enable us to theologically reflect on the dynamic of God's mission and draw us back to the principles of restoration. These principles are not for the sake of restoring ideals but that we might also participate in the life of the early church. "It compels us to approach theology as disciples called to participate together in God's mission."¹⁶⁴

Summary

The trajectory of this chapter began with exploring how the epistemology of Alexander Campbell may have influenced the movement of Churches of Christ as it emerged in South Australia. Campbell's influence is reflected in key characteristics of the movement evident today. The core agenda emerging out of this task was to probe Campbell's understanding of the doctrine of God to develop a baseline for how Churches of Christ in South Australia might engage a theological framework. It has been established that Campbell's theology was Trinitarian by nature, even if not explicitly stated. This set the foundation for further exploring some developments in Trinitarian theology, with an appreciation of the Christian tradition, focusing on some contemporary reformed perspectives. The second part of my agenda was to explore how this Trinitarian theological framework might inform the missional nature of Churches of Christ in South Australia.

Key themes have been identified that will be carried through the project intervention. First, the role of epistemic theories informed by various hermeneutic trajectories are given greater freedom through the canonical theism project. A theological framework should reflect a dialogue with the canonical heritage of the church and the

164. Powell, Hicks, and McKinzie, *Discipleship*, 153.

ongoing revelation of God. Second, the nature of the Triune God as *perichoresis* invites the church into a dance that shapes the church as image bearers of the unity that exists within the Godhead. Third, when the church is shaped by the nature of God, its identity is missionary by nature, participating in God's mission in the world. The church becomes God's message of good news in the world. Fourth, the agency of God is primary to all missional innovation.

Using the perichoretic framework, I have proposed a way for Churches of Christ to engage the principles and agendas set out by Alexander Campbell and stimulate a fresh imagination as to how Churches of Christ can engage with this proposal today. The six perspectives outlined for reimagining Churches of Christ as a movement of congregations in South Australia shaped by the dynamic of *perichoresis* will be explored further in the intervention.

CHAPTER III
METHODOLOGY
Qualitative Research

The purpose of this project is to construct a theological framework that revitalizes the missional nature of Churches of Christ in South Australia. Chapter 1 described the ministry context in two parts. First, I highlighted some of the ways theology and practice developed, then I identified a problem within the current context that led to this project intervention. In chapter 2, I explored the epistemology of Alexander Campbell with particular attention given to his doctrine of God, which I have described as Trinitarian. Campbell's epistemic methods and the canonical theism project offered a theoretical framework for exploring *perichoresis*. A biblical case for perichoretic theology has been presented to inform this intervention to shape a dynamic theological framework that revitalizes mission.

I have used qualitative research methods throughout the intervention to address a problem in the lived experience of the participants.¹ Qualitative research methods offer the most effective approach to studying the problem, and I have used multiple methods to triangulate and collect data for analysis.² I used participatory action research to collect data through forming a research and development team as the primary focus group to

1. Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, 150.

2. Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, 172–76.

explore the problem. I participated in the team as the primary researcher. The advantage of this method is that it invites broader participation in gathering and discerning information with others, which increases the likelihood of this project's impact on my ministry context. This process draws participants into the inquiry, learning, and evaluation while minimizing power differences between myself as the primary researcher and participants.³ My inquiry method is also heuristic, understanding that “phenomenological inquiry” draws out my personal experiences and insights.⁴

Using the experience of working in this ministry context for nearly ten years, I invited a group of ministers to form a research and development team. I used purposive sampling⁵ to select participants for this group, seeking to include a diverse range of perspectives within the team. Though my intention was for this team to represent a diversity of ministers in this context, it was limited to a homogeneous sample due to the current demographics of ministers within the context. This means the sample group was predominantly from a White Euro-Western background and over the age of fifty. This represents the demographics of Churches of Christ in South Australia. The group included male and female participants.

I delimited the selection criteria to accredited Churches of Christ ministers who have broad experience working across the association of Churches of Christ in South Australia. The aim in doing this was to strengthen the credibility and reliability of insights offered by the group. This criterion included having held senior leadership roles

3. Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, 153.

4. Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, 287.

5. Purposive sampling is a method for gathering people with particular awareness and expertise that will contribute most effectively to the research. Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, 165.

with congregations and having served the association on working groups or boards. Participants brought breadth and depth to the conversation through their lived experiences of Churches of Christ as a movement of associated congregations in South Australia. I also identified participants who had background in research and resource development. I drew on my own experience to select ministers who would bring differences in theological perspectives and rigor to the conversation. This is difficult to assess and was a subjective approach based on my own knowledge of the ministers. Theological diversity in the team helped bring rigor and credibility to the project's aim, drawing divergent perspectives into dialogue with one another and discerning common themes.

Intervention and Participant Overview

Following the criteria, I used the solicitation email to select a research and development team of eight ministers.⁶ The ages of participants ranged from mid-thirties to mid-seventies. There were five men and three women in the sample group. Two participants were transitioning to retirement, two ministers were between ministry placements, and four ministers were actively involved in congregational ministry. The following table offers a description of each participant (see table 1).

6. See Appendix C.

Table 1. *Research and Development Team Description*

Participant	Role	Experience
P1	Retired Minister	Congregational member, served on state association committees, more than 30 years congregational ministry.
P2	Minister	Active minister in a congregational placement, served on state association committees, more than 10 years congregational ministry.
P3	Semi-Retired Minister	Congregational ministry team member, served on state association committees, more than 30 years congregational ministry.
P4	Minister	Active minister in a congregational placement, active on state association committees, more than 10 years congregational ministry.
P5	Minister	Active minister in a congregational placement, active on state association committees, fewer than 5 years congregational ministry.
P6	Minister	Congregational member, served on state association committees, currently between ministries, more than 10 years congregational ministry.
P7	Minister	Congregational member, served on state association committees, currently between ministries, more than 10 years congregational ministry.
P8	Retired Minister	Congregational board member, served on state association committees, more than 5 years congregational ministry.

The team's purpose was to develop a study guide addressing the need to construct a theological framework that revitalizes the missional nature of Churches of Christ in South Australia. Using my observations and conversations with congregational leaders and ministers to analyze my context, I identified six areas to inform the initial line of inquiry into the theology and practice of Churches of Christ in South Australia.

1. The authority of Scripture and the interpretation principle
2. Diversity within a unity movement
3. Interdependence among autonomous congregations
4. The Lord's Supper

5. Believers' baptism by immersion
6. The participation of every believer in the ministry of the church

I met with the development team eight times. Meetings were held on Sunday afternoons for two hours from 2:00 to 4:00 p.m. We tried to remain within a cycle of meeting every two weeks but adjusted meeting times to avoid holiday weekends. I used an independent notetaker to record field notes at each meeting, supplying them with a laptop, notetaking template, and field note protocol.⁷

Prior to each session, I handed the participants a brief paper which introduced the topic for discussion. This was made available to participants at the end of each session to give them time to prepare for discussion in the following session. I also invited each participant to a Google Document where I provided a write up of the study we developed during the session. Participants interacted with this document between sessions to make comments, edit, and shape the study for that week.

Session Descriptions

Session 1: February 13, 2022

The agenda for the first session included an introduction to the purpose of the project intervention, a basic explanation of the conceptual rationale, gathering signatures on the consent forms, and an opportunity for the team to ask clarifying questions regarding the project and their participation. Prior to the group gathering for the first session, I emailed the consent form and focus group protocol to each participant to allow time for them to read through the documents and consider any questions they would like

7. See Appendix E.

to ask.⁸ I asked the field notetaker to arrive thirty minutes early so we could review the field note protocol and I could explain how I wanted to capture the data. When the participants arrived, I provided them with an outline of the first session.⁹ I began with reviewing the consent form and focus group protocol, which explicitly stated the protocols for participation in the intervention.¹⁰ I emphasized the voluntary nature of their participation along with the ability to cease participation at any time. I also discussed confidentiality and the expectations for participation according to the focus group protocol. Each participant was invited to sign the consent form before we proceeded. I signed each form and provided a copy for each participant at the conclusion of the session.

To begin the conversation, I stated the problem I had identified within Churches of Christ in South Australia and talked about how I discerned a purpose for this study. I then asked the team if they had any particular hopes or hesitations with exploring this project proposal. After a brief discussion, I offered a historical overview of the context so the team had some understanding of the broader context that informs the project. Then, I offered an overview of my conceptual framework.

In the summary overview, I drew attention to how Alexander Campbell's epistemology had informed the establishment of Churches of Christ in South Australia. I offered a theological proposal in line with Alexander Campbell's doctrine of God as a broad theological basis for conversation. I explained that although Campbell did not

8. See Appendix F.

9. See Appendix I.

10. See Appendix D.

acknowledge the term *Trinity*, his doctrine of God offered an orthodox understanding of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as the co-equal, interdependent entities of the Godhead. I referenced Mark Powell's suggestion that this doctrine of God offers a broadly accepted ecumenical foundation for theological conversation.¹¹ Then I introduced the team to the term *perichoresis* to describe how this doctrine of God informs the missional nature of the church. A quote from Jürgen Moltmann was used to highlight how mission is a dynamic and transformative activity of the Triune God.¹² I proposed to the team that Churches of Christ in South Australia needs to draw on the resources of *perichoresis* in order to frame a movement for dynamic and transformative participation in God's mission.

Finally, I proposed a structure for the remaining sessions. Following the themes named in chapter 2, I proposed six topics for exploration. I explained to the team that I would develop a handout in preparation for each session that outlined a discussion for each topic. The team's task was to discuss the topic and help construct a study guide as a response to each discussion.¹³ I explained that the purpose of each discussion was to develop an informed historical and theological understanding for each study and develop a missional practice that invited participation.

To assist the team with their work, I asked them to consider some questions throughout the intervention as they developed the study guide.

- How will the topic be introduced?

11. Powell, "Canonical Theism," 252.

12. "It is not the church that has a mission of salvation to fulfill in the world; it is the mission of the Son and the Spirit through the Father that includes the church, creating a church as it goes on its way." Moltmann, *The Church*, 64.

13. See Appendix I.

- What format should the study guide take?
- How will each topic be presented for discussion and exploration so that it is an effective educational resource?
- What is important to communicate about each topic?
- What Scripture will help guide the particular theme?
- Why is this theme important for shaping theological perspectives within the movement?
- Is there a historical narrative that needs to be included with each topic?
- How will essential continuity bear relevance to Churches of Christ today?
- How will this topic impact the missional nature of a church?
- What sorts of discussion questions should be included in the study guide for each topic?
- What sorts of missional practices should be included to help people put their discussion into action?

In order to inform the group of their task a little more, I offered them a brief reflection on how I understood the term *missional practice*. This was to assist with orienting the group towards the desired outcome of the study guide.

I explained to the team what each session would involve and then invited them to consider asking people in their congregation to evaluate the study guide as outside observers. Each team member was asked to think of two or three members in their congregation who could read the study guide and anonymously answer the questionnaire.¹⁴ The final session would be for the team to evaluate the study guide. We then agreed on a schedule for when we would meet and a date to complete the work. At

14. See Appendix H.

the conclusion of session 1, I handed the team a discussion paper for session 2 and uploaded the handout from sessions 1 and 2 to a Google folder to which each participant had access. I started a template for the study guide, which listed the guiding questions for the remaining sessions, as a Google Document. This template was populated with the study guide as the team developed it with me.

Session 2: February 20, 2022

This session invited the participants to contribute to shaping the content for the first study. Prior to the commencement of the second session, I was contacted by participant 8, who informed me that they were no longer able to participate due to a health concern. For the remainder of the intervention the team had seven participants.

I titled the discussion of the session 2 handout “Why Scripture Is Vital.”¹⁵ I started with the topic of Scripture to suggest that this is the most vital starting point for discussion when forming a study guide for Churches of Christ. The discussion paper oriented the team around the historical and theological significance of this topic. The questions at the end of the handout helped direct the team towards the key elements of the study guide that needed to be developed.

I spent the first ten minutes with the team checking if there was anything that needed to be clarified before entering into the conversation. This proved to be a valuable way to begin, as not everyone was clear on what the task was for this session. The team was enthusiastic to talk about the content of the session, but I needed to clarify the outcomes.

15. See session 2 in Appendix I.

I broke the team into two pairs and one group of three to discuss the handout and associated questions in more detail. One person in each group was designated to take notes of their conversation. I assigned people to groups and kept a note of who was meeting with whom so the groups could be rearranged for the following session. The purpose of doing this was to ensure divergent perspectives were shared in the session.

The first hour was dedicated to small group discussion, and the second hour was dedicated to coming together as a team to discuss what they had talked about and to begin to shape the structure of the first study. By the end of session 2, I ensured the group had designed a discussion and a missional practice and titled the first study. The team decided to name the first study “Why Start with Scripture?” The missional practice they designed was a practice of *lectio divina*. At the end of the session, I gave the group the handout for session 3 and uploaded it to the Google folder.

We concluded the session at the agreed time, but members of the group stayed behind to talk. Two members of the group who had vocally disagreed with one another during the session and disagreed on the nature of the Trinity stayed the longest laughing and enjoying the conversation. This interested me because part of the problem I have identified is that people within the movement who hold divergent theological views struggle to enter into meaningful dialogue with one another.

Session 3: March 6, 2022

During the week leading up to session 3, I structured the first study, “Why Start with Scripture,” for the study guide in the Google Document. Members began to interact with the document, making comments and editing suggestions. We had decided as a

group that it was best to develop a firm draft of each study before we moved our attention to the next one.

I titled the discussion of the session 3 handout “How Diversity within Our Unity Is Missional.”¹⁶ This discussion was set up to probe the issue of diversity of opinion within Churches of Christ in South Australia. It also highlighted the historical aspirations and continuity of the plea for Christian unity. This discussion began to draw on the resources of *perichoresis* to develop a theological basis for diversity within our unity and a missional proposal for how the outpouring of God’s love through the church could affect the missional nature of Churches of Christ as a movement.

The ten-minute check-in at the beginning of session 3 elicited a deeper interest in how I had written about *perichoresis* in chapter 2. Participant 3 asked to read chapter 2, so I committed to emailing a draft of the chapter once the session concluded. All seven participants were present, and I was able to break them into different groups for discussion in the first hour before they came back together for the team discussion.

The conversation about Trinitarian theology was more impassioned this time, and the group was divided on my proposal as to how Trinitarian theology should be utilized within this project. After discussion, there was a general consensus on leaning into my original proposal. Regarding unity, the team wanted to emphasize that Churches of Christ is not a conformity movement but a self-emptying movement.

At the conclusion of session 3, the team had named the second study by framing another question “Does God’s Mission Unite Us?” The missional practice they designed for the study was practicing acts of God’s love towards one another so that people

16. See session 3 in Appendix I.

practiced a state of readiness to participate in God’s mission. Acts of love were not prescribed, but study participants are invited to describe these after reading Rom 12:1–21. I distributed the handout for session 4 and uploaded it to the Google folder.

Session 4: March 20, 2022

In the lead-up to session 4, I added the second study to the Google Document and the team began to interact with it. About an hour before the beginning of the session 4, I received a message from participant 7 explaining they could not make it to the meeting due to the inability to travel and asked to join the meeting via Zoom. I checked with the group if that would be appropriate, and all agreed to allow participant 7 to Zoom in on an iPad we set up.

At the beginning of the meeting, as the group considered the conversation for this session, a deeper commitment from the team to the outcome of this intervention was evident. Participant 1 said that people they had spoken to in their congregation about the study guide were quite excited to hear this was in development. The team was more animated about their participation in the intervention, expressing their hopes for the outcome and sharing thoughts on the topics being explored. The participants were more comfortable with their own vulnerability in the group and showed greater willingness to articulate their differences in discussing topics.

I titled the discussion of the session 4 handout “Interdependence as a Reflection of God’s Missional Nature.”¹⁷ This paper was written as a continuation of the previous handout, drawing focus towards the interdependent nature of the Trinity as a model for how Churches of Christ congregations participate in the mission of God together. I

17. See session 4 in Appendix I.

focused the conversation through Alexander Campbell's reflection that "we can do little or nothing to improve and elevate the Christian ministry without cooperation."¹⁸

The team was split into three small groups to discuss the topic with questions provided in the handout to guide their conversation. For the second hour of this session, the team came together and shared what they had discussed. Participant 3 said they had a deeper appreciation for the Trinitarian theology I was proposing after reading chapter 2 and participating in the group discussions. The group began using the term *perichoresis* more often during their discussions.

The team decided to name the third study "Better Together as One in Christ." The missional practice they developed followed from the second study and incorporated a broader ecumenical awareness as well as developing dialogue with other Church of Christ congregations. The practice of listening involved listening for God by listening to other Christian traditions and one another to enhance discipleship development. At the conclusion of the meeting, I distributed the handout for session 5 and uploaded it to the Google folder.

Session 5: April 3, 2022

Between sessions 4 and 5, I added a draft of the third study and the team contributed to developing it further. Prior to session 5, I initiated an edit to the consent form, allowing for the use of Zoom meetings to accommodate a Covid-19 protocol. Each member of the team signed revised consent forms prior to session 5.

I made plans for the group to meet in a room on the premises we had been using, which was better suited to using Zoom for participants who were not able to join the

18. Foster, *A Life*, 145.

conversations in person. The technology in this room was set up especially for this purpose, so it was much easier to include participants via Zoom. We required the use of this technology for this meeting as participant 4 had been diagnosed with Covid-19 and was isolated. As a result, they joined the conversation via Zoom.

The team had now settled into the rhythm of breaking into smaller group conversations for the first hour and coming back together for the whole group to discuss and develop the study in the second half of the session. Less time was required at the beginning of the meeting for clarifying questions, so I used this time to remind the team about the desired outcome at the end of our discussion.

The conversation presented on the handout was titled “The Lord’s Supper and Being God’s Sent Ones.”¹⁹ This paper was written to draw attention to sacramental practices within the movement. Beginning with the historical origins of the Lord’s Supper significance for Churches of Christ, the handout focused the team on discussing the missional implications of this weekly Sunday worship practice. There was a thread connecting to previous discussions about whether this was an exclusive or open practice. Using a quote from Isaac Errett stating that “our practice is neither to invite nor reject,”²⁰ I made a proposal for an awareness of the presence of Christ at all tables as suggested by Gordon Stirling.²¹

Participant 4 left to have a rest after the small group conversations, as the effects of Covid-19 caused fatigue. When the team came back together, the conversation flowed

19. See session 5 in Appendix I.

20. Foster, *A Life*, 492.

21. Stirling, *Churches of Christ*, 19.

easily. The team named the fourth study “Formed and Transformed by the Lord’s Supper.” The team developed a missional practice around how we model God’s grace and hospitality for ourselves, around the table towards others, and at other tables during the week. At the conclusion of the meeting, I distributed the handout for session 6 and uploaded it to the Google folder.

Session 6: April 24, 2022

We had a larger break between session 5 and 6 due to the Easter holidays. This gap was agreed to by the group as part of the original scheduling, which meant there was only one week between sessions 6 and 7 to stay within our agreed time frame. Participant 2 was absent due to a Covid-19 diagnosis and was too unwell to participate. Participant 4 did not attend the meeting due to an incorrect diary entry and regretted not being present.

The larger break allowed for more interaction on the Google Document to develop the study guide. Before breaking into groups to discuss the handout, we picked up a conversation that had been developing in the Google Document about how we structured each study. The consensus of the team was to work on three sections for each study. The first was to be titled “Discover,” which invited the reader to discover something about why this was an important part of the framework for Churches of Christ. The second part of the study was to be named “Engage.” This invited the reader to engage with how this topic is experienced in Churches of Christ today. The third part of the study was to be titled “Participate.” This was to help the reader make the transition from discussing Churches of Christ in theory to participating in a missional practice associated with the topic.

I broke the team into two groups due to there being fewer participants. The conversation invited by the handout was titled “Believer’s Baptism and the Eschatological Mission of God.”²² This paper was a continuation of the previous handout on the Lord’s Supper, exploring the traditional association of the two sacramental practices in Churches of Christ. While advocating for believer’s baptism by immersion as broadly practiced in Churches of Christ, I invited the team to wrestle with the theological and ecclesiological significance of this practice for churches today. I introduced some thinking articulated by John Mark Hicks and Greg Taylor on Alexander Campbell’s preference for the transformed life and character of a believer over ritual.²³

The team was increasingly animated and less inhibited now that we had been working together for two months. Conversation was lively, and participants were prepared to take more risks to express their thoughts. They named the fifth study “Dare to Be Identified.” The missional practice encouraged participants to practice two things. Firstly, in baptism they are ordained into ministry, so the reader is invited to consider how they participate in the mission of God. Secondly, the reader is invited to consider how they would articulate their testimony as a follower of Jesus and to practice talking about what it means to follow Jesus with people in their relational orbit. At the conclusion of the meeting, I distributed the handout for session 7 and uploaded it to the Google folder. This was the final handout.

22. See session 6 in Appendix I.

23. Hicks and Taylor, *Down in the River*, ch.7.

Session 7: May 1, 2022

This session was the final meeting dedicated to discussing the handout and developing a study. Participant 2 was absent again due to Covid-19. Participant 4 was also absent again due to unforeseen family commitments but submitted a paper with their reflections to contribute to the conversation. There were no matters for clarification at the beginning of the session; however, participants volunteered their thoughts on how meaningful this process had been for them and celebrated being able to participate in these conversations. They lamented that this was the final conversation for developing the study.

Even though the time between this session and the previous one was shorter, the team had committed to interacting with the study guide development document in anticipation of the final study being developed in session 7. The handout that guided this conversation was titled “The Community of Believers and Mutual Ministry of God’s People.”²⁴ This discussion continued from the idea that was introduced through the previous handout: all believers are ordained for ministry. Highlighting the ecclesiology of Churches of Christ, the paper drew the team into a conversation about what the mutual ministry of all believers practically looks like within the theological framework of *perichoresis*. Drawing on Catherine LaCugna’s proposal that in the life of God all believers “exist together as equal partners in Christ,”²⁵ I invited the team to consider how accountability and mutual participation in the body of Christ are valued.

24. See session 7 in Appendix I.

25. LaCugna, “The Practical Trinity,” 682.

Due to the smaller size of the team for session 7, they discussed the topic in two groups and then came back together in the second hour to develop the study. The team named the sixth and final study “A Responsibility to Participate in Ministry.” The missional practice focused on helping people develop a posture of humility in service within the life of the church and in the broader community.

At the conclusion of the meeting, I discussed with the team that we needed to finalize the development of the study guide within the coming week. I committed to adding a draft of the final study so the team could add their final edits and comments. I invited the team to think of two or three people in their congregation they were going to ask to evaluate the study guide as an outsider. I committed to sending the final draft of the study guide along with the outsider questionnaire via email at the end of the coming week.²⁶ I also explained that session 8 would be dedicated to each team member completing the insider questionnaire and that we would have a final conversation over afternoon tea about our evaluation of the study guide and the experience of participating in the intervention.²⁷

Before the session concluded, the team suggested things that could be added to the study guide to enhance engagement. This included pre-recorded videos for each study that could be accessed with a QR code. We agreed that there was not enough time to produce these videos for evaluation. I added a place holder of the QR code on the first page of each study so the person evaluating the study guide knew about the intention to include this feature.

26. See Appendix H and Appendix J.

27. See Appendix G.

Session 8: May 22, 2022

All participants were present for the final session. Most participants handed me completed outside observer questionnaires at the beginning of the meeting. Once everyone was present, I invited each participant to find a space where they could complete the research and development team questionnaire. I provided pens and copies of the study guide for everyone.

The first hour was dedicated to completing the evaluation of the study guide. I provided an afternoon tea for the group to celebrate our time together. Then we gathered to discuss the evaluation and experience of being part of the intervention.

The team was very open in talking about the topics in the study guide and excited to discuss how it can be developed further and distributed throughout Churches of Christ. Not only did they have pride in their work, but they had developed depth in their relationships with one another that enhanced trust, honesty, and free-flowing conversation within the group. They shared great enthusiasm for the implementation of the study guide with Churches of Christ and believed it would make a significant difference in helping congregations frame who they are and how they participate in the movement. Each participant in the team volunteered their ongoing assistance in developing the study guide for distribution.

The primary data collected for evaluation were recorded by the field notetaker using the field note protocol template during participatory sessions described above. I also collected notes taken by participants during their breakout group conversations to collaborate with the field notes. Immediately following each session, I recorded my own observations and impressions in the third column of the field note protocol.

Data Collection and Evaluation

The purpose of the intervention was to use data triangulation for evaluating three different angles in response to the identified problem.²⁸ The three angles used for evaluation were the participant researcher (myself), the research and development team (focus group), and outside observer. Data from the outsider perspective were collected via a questionnaire.²⁹ The convergence and divergence of the three angles enabled me to identify slippages and silences in the data.

Field Notes

The primary method of data collection was field notes recorded by a notetaker using the field note protocol template during the participatory sessions described above.³⁰ Participants added to the field notes through the notes they took during breakout conversations in each session. I collected these to collaborate with the field notes. Immediately following each session, I recorded my own observations and impressions in the third column of the field note protocol. This included my own reflexive observations about how I participated in the session. This is an important addition to the field notes, as the project itself represents my voice and interpretations of the context being researched and I have a particular investment in the outcomes.³¹

28. Sensing describes data triangulation as a way of capturing information that might be describing things from different angles, then analyzing and cross-checking data to check for reliability of that information. Data triangulation, as opposed to investigator theory or methodological triangulation, is a more suitable method for a qualitative study such as this one. Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, 172–76.

29. See Appendix H.

30. See Appendix E.

31. “No matter how neutral and objective the researchers want to be during the project, they influence and are influenced by their projects, sources of data, participants, and other related factors.” Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, 133–34.

Researcher Angle

As the researcher, I influenced the framework for data collection through a coding method that included a number of different steps involving both deductive and inductive coding.³² I began with a deductive coding method. This included reading back through my prospectus with particular attention given to the conceptual framework, problem statement, and purpose statement. I was able to develop a coding index of twenty-one codes represented in the conceptual framework in chapter 2. These codes set the agenda for developing themes and subthemes from the data. After an initial read-through of the field notes, I placed the codes into thematic groupings in a table set out in a Word document, then assigned a number code to each, which was used as a protocol for coding the field note data.

Each theme was assigned a color code so that when I read through the field notes I was able to highlight where these themes emerged. I used comments in Word to assign the number associated with that code and highlighted it with the associated color code so I was able to track how often certain themes were emerging. Following this, I engaged an inductive coding method to build theory. I read back through each session in search of new codes that may have emerged from the data but were not identified in my initial index. I was able to assign emerging codes to themes I had already identified. Emerging codes helped to build theory and develop a broader narrative.

I developed another table to identify how many occurrences of each theme appeared in the data. In a different table, I listed the subthemes alongside the themes and

32. This is a form of grounded theory used as a framework to enhance the standardization and rigor of the data. Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, 314–18.

noted in which sessions each subtheme was discussed. Finally, I created a new document using the major themes as headings then grouped all the comments from the field notes under that heading to help build a narrative associated with that theme.

Throughout the intervention, I worked with the focus group to begin building the first draft of the study guide through a Google Document. This enabled me to begin to draft a response to what I was hearing, then gain immediate feedback and extra input from the group as we developed the study guide.

Insider Angle

The research and development team formed the focus group who contributed to the primary data being analyzed. Prior to each session they were given a paper prepared by me to read. This helped orient participants around the content to be discussed at each session. During the sessions, each participant was handed a clipboard with notetaking paper, a pen, and a printout of the discussion paper with guiding questions for conversation.³³ This procedure helped maximize the time we had to discuss topics in breakout groups then bring our conversation back to the whole group for further interaction.

After the first session, the team was given access to a Google Document where we began to develop the study guide in the time between each session. They contributed their insights, experience, questions, and critiques as I added content. Their input helped build the content of the study guide as we went. Between the penultimate and final sessions, the research and development team was emailed a first draft of the study guide

33. See Appendix I.

they helped create. During the final session, the participants completed a questionnaire where they evaluated the first draft of the study guide.³⁴

Outsider Angle

After the first draft of the study guide was completed, copies were made available to the research and development team along with the outside observer questionnaire. Each team member was asked to find two or three active members of their congregations to act as outside evaluators. Each person identified was invited to read through the draft of the study guide then complete the questionnaire anonymously. The team collected seventeen completed questionnaires and handed them to me.

Summary

I have described the eight sessions of the project intervention that engaged the research and development team in the task of drafting a study guide. I used participatory action research to collect data through the field notes. Bringing together field notes and questionnaires from the research and development team, my own insights, and the outside observer questionnaires created a data set for analysis. Triangulating the data using the three angles of insider, outsider, and researcher enhanced the validity of the analysis and will be articulated in the following chapter. I will now develop a narrative of results from this process.

34. See Appendix G.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS AND RESULTS

The previous chapters have outlined the ministry context that inspired this project intervention, a theoretical and theological rationale, and an applied methodology that was proposed to address an identified problem within this ministry context. Chapter 2 developed themes through the discipline of theological interpretation drawing on the resources of canonical theism; a perichoretic theology; a proposal for how *perichoresis* informs the mission of the church, and how God's mission invites participation; the place of sacramental practices in the Churches of Christ tradition that inform missional imagination; and the activity of God as a dynamic in the world today. These themes have been carried through into the project intervention through discussion papers designed to stimulate conversation for the focus group.

The intervention involved working with a focus group, which I refer to as a research and development team, made up of seven Churches of Christ ministers from a diversity of backgrounds. The purpose of the group was to develop a study guide to help construct a theological framework that revitalizes the missional nature of Churches of Christ in South Australia. This chapter will explore how the research and development team discussed key subjects presented to them in the sessions through the discussion papers. This process enabled them to formulate a study guide. Five themes emerged from coding the data in the field notes: theological epistemology, perichoretic ecclesiology, missional participation, sacramental ontology, and God's agency. I have visualized how

these themes and subthemes relate to each other in a Venn diagram, so I will present the construction of this diagram as the themes are explored.

Theological Epistemology

Discussing theology and how we develop and hold certain theological convictions was a prominent theme through all sessions. The emergence of this theme in the data was expected because constructing a theological framework is a major task of this project. The two subthemes I will discuss below include engaging Scripture and theological dialogue with some focus given to the tensions identified with codes such as interpretation, diversity, and belief.

Engaging Scripture

The team spent a considerable amount of time in the first two sessions discussing the challenges and opportunities that exist within Churches of Christ congregations, which are not constituted by a common creed. Everyone agreed that Scripture is the essential foundation for articulating our theology. Participant 3 observed that biblical inquiry can lead to a number of different points of view, which is problematic if we do this in isolation from one another.¹ Participants 7 and 6 both raised concerns about biblical literacy today, acknowledging that we have more access to Scripture than ever, but biblical illiteracy is growing.² This raised concerns in the group as to the integrity of our theological method. If Scripture is our primary method of articulating theology, how is it being accessed and interpreted?

1. Field notes, session 1.

2. Field notes, session 1.

Members of the team often contrasted a commitment to read and interpret Scripture with having a creed that outlines the essentials of theological beliefs. The team often discussed how to articulate the essentials of what we believe about God. While some saw the benefits of creeds to narrow the essentials of what we say we believe about God, others were concerned about the exclusive nature of faith statements that may omit things we want to be able to say about God. Participant 7 stated, “Creedal statements help and protect the church from heretical beliefs. Stone and Campbell were not opposed to creeds; they were opposed to how they were used to exclude people. The challenge is to not exclude. But we exclude now.”³ Participant 4 responded by saying that when we read Scripture, we exclude all the time. We need to be able to “say stuff about God,” but the method of engaging with Scripture means that some will agree and some will disagree. The challenge is that many people are not interested in theological reflection as we read Scripture.⁴

In the second session, the group entered a deeper conversation about how Scripture is engaged. All agreed that diversity within the movement is important and that bringing various hermeneutical lenses to the task of reading Scripture and allowing Scripture to read us enriches our interpretative methods and deepens our understanding of who God is. “Diversity of interpretation is an important part of Churches of Christ. I would like to see people who can sit together and hear the different points view when reading the Bible together and not feel threatened by that.”⁵ This comment from

3. Field notes, session 1.

4. Field notes, session 1.

5. Field notes, session 2.

participant 5 resonated with the team and sparked a conversation about how Scripture is used in churches today. To summarize, the team was concerned that people approach Scripture as a way to find answers to their questions rather than seeking an encounter with God who transforms them.⁶

It was agreed that Scripture plays a vital role in forming our theology and helping us articulate what we need to be able to say about God. There was a desire expressed within the group to define essential beliefs about God, and all agreed that Scripture reveals that Jesus Christ is Lord and that is ultimately what we confess. Participant 2 added that Scripture clearly articulates the Trinitarian nature of God, and others on the team agreed that this presented a helpful theological framework for how we talk about God and participate in God's mission. Participant 3 added, "Trinity language matters because we all believe it."⁷

Scripture emerged as a prominent context for articulating theology. The group decided that the most helpful approach to Scripture was to acknowledge and affirm that we all bring different interpretive lenses to the text. However, we ought not engage the task of interpretation by ourselves. The most effective method for developing theology is reading and discussing Scripture with others and in context, but first, we must allow the text to read us so we may have a fresh encounter with God. Having an experience of God through Scripture was a strong undercurrent articulated by each participant at different points throughout the intervention. Therefore, the team agreed that Scripture needs to be

6. Field notes, session 2. This was advocated by participant 4, affirmed by participant 6, and there was general agreement in the team.

7. Field notes, session 3.

integrated into every aspect of the study guide as a vital part of the theological task. “It’s how we come to know God.”⁸

Theological Dialogue

The team was concerned about balancing the conversation to acknowledge the diversity of theological expression within the movement while holding in tension that there are theological ideas that are central to the Christian faith and should be stated explicitly. Participant 3 observed, “We exist because of theological difference; now we have a mishmash of every idea in our churches.”⁹ Others affirmed these differences reflect the ecumenical nature of Churches of Christ congregations and that theological diversity ought to be respected because we can learn so much about God from one another.

Participant 2 raised an example of theological differences that divide us and is problematic within Churches of Christ as a movement of associated congregations. Reference was made to a large gathering of our congregations in 2017, where a public discussion emerged between some ministers in the gathering about their understanding of the gospel. Participant 2 stated, “We don’t have the same gospel! We are a group of autonomous churches that work together, but we don’t agree on the gospel.”¹⁰ Participant 3 responded by saying that all ministers preach the gospel every Sunday, but there are

8. Field notes, session 2, participant 2.

9. Field notes, session 1.

10. Field notes, session 4.

nuances in how this is articulated. “Our problem is we don’t work together, and we don’t talk about it.”¹¹

Emerging codes such as creed, catechism, Didache, and right belief appeared as the tensions in theological diversity were discussed. The context of these codes in the data are described in two ways. Firstly, they were referred to as reference points to talk about how the early church articulated what they believed about God. Secondly, they were referred to in order to avoid shaping a rigid theological framework that excludes. However, participants noted that the very fact of making a statement about what we believe is, in some ways, exclusionary. This was a tension that needed careful consideration.

It became clear as differences in theology were discussed throughout each session that coming together to allow Scripture to read us is a vitally important method for the ongoing formation of our theology. The independent nature of each congregation does not serve this vision well. In sessions 6 and 7, after the team had spent considerable time together discussing various topics over a number of months, they began to articulate the challenges to addressing differences in theology. Words such as fear and suspicion began to emerge in the data. Suspicion of one another was attributed to lack of relationship, and participants said that, at times, they were afraid to articulate a theological position for fear of being misunderstood or not heard. During session 2, three participants thanked me for articulating my theology in session 1. It gave them greater confidence to participate in the intervention, and they found the Trinitarian framework a helpful orientation for a theological conversation.

11. Field notes, session 4.

In the final session, participants revisited what it was like to participate in conversations where they listened to and articulated their own theology with people they were getting to know better. There was an overwhelming affirmation of the process with some participants lamenting that this was our last meeting. Participant 6 said, “I appreciated the journey of realizing that we’re not so different. Getting together in these discussions has been meaningful. I enjoyed the intimacy of talking one on one with someone and discovering that our neighbor is right here and closer than I realized.”¹² Participant 4 said, “Agreeing to disagree is not enough. Unity is essential. When we sit together and discuss essentials, there is unity. This is encouraging. Often when talking, we become defensive, to deal with a problem, but framing conversations the way we have here highlights unity.”¹³

Throughout the intervention, participants often balanced the tension of what might be considered orthodox theological beliefs with a respect for theological diversity within the movement. What they discovered was that they were not as theologically diverse as they had originally anticipated. When time was given to dialogue with and listen to each other, they found more in common with what they considered essentials of Christian faith than what they had originally anticipated. This came through building trust and confidence to participate in dialogue with others. They found it helpful to have a proposed theological framework in Trinitarian theology as a reference point. The team considered this to be biblical and broadly accepted across Christian traditions.

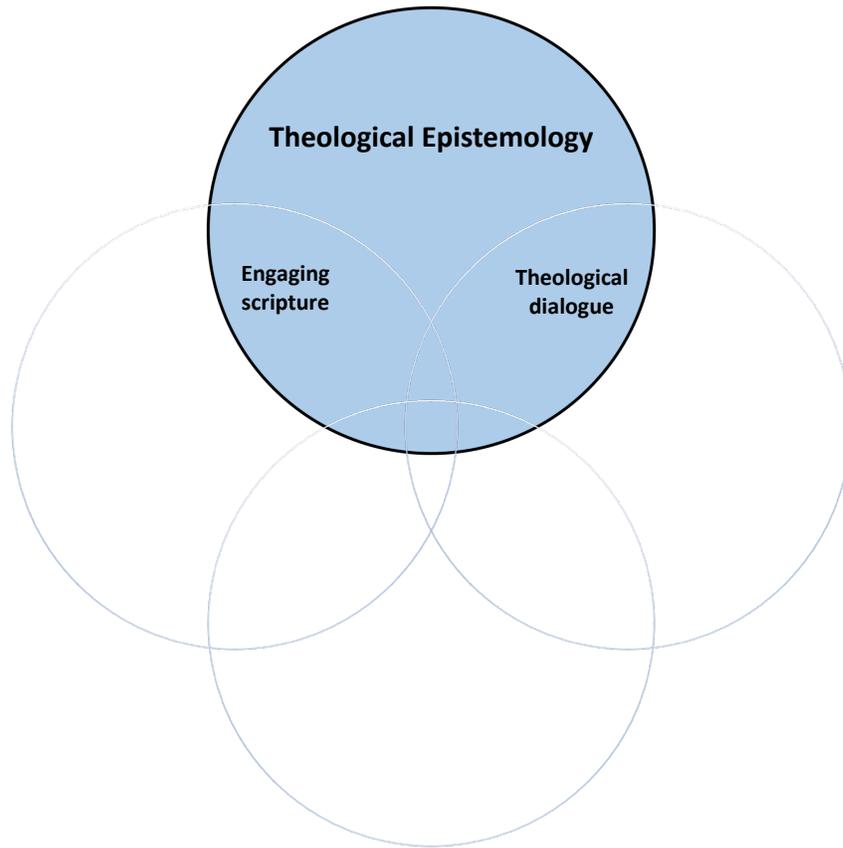
12. Field notes, session 8.

13. Field notes, session 8.

The team was hesitant to prescribe a passage of Scripture for each of the conversations developed within the study guide. As we progressed through the sessions, the data show that Scripture was quoted as part of conversation naturally in each session. By the end of session 7, it was decided that a passage of Scripture be prescribed for all six topics to be explored in the study guide. This was to help orient learning around dwelling in Scripture. The team decided that a standard needed to be set for how to engage with Scripture, which is why the practice of *lectio divina* was set as a missional practice. It was decided that John 1:1–18 was an appropriate text to use for this exercise in the first study as it reflects part of what was explored in the theological rationale for this project. The desire of the team was for a practice of *lectio divina* to be integrated into each of the following studies so that participants would learn the art of letting Scripture read them and having an encounter with God in the text. The team also discussed the importance of this method of theological inquiry for missional practice. Participant 4 stated that “the missional imagination of congregations is anemic due to a lack of theological reflection. Revitalization requires a greater depth of theology through biblical engagement.”¹⁴ Figure 3 displays the first of the five themes added into the Venn diagram.

14. Field notes, session 1.

Figure 3. *Theological Epistemology*



Perichoretic Ecclesiology

Another theme that continued to emerge prominently throughout the intervention was the unity and diversity of the church reflected in the unity and diversity of the Godhead. *Perichoresis* as a theological framework was anticipated because I introduced this in the first session. I introduced a vision for the church in session 3, but I had not anticipated the frequency with which conversations about the nature of the church as a reflection of this image continued to emerge throughout the intervention. Perichoretic ecclesiology will be discussed through the subthemes of ecclesiological formation and

Trinitarian theology with reference to codes such as unity, diversity, interdependence, autonomy, and identity.

Ecclesiological Formation

A helpful image that emerged in the data from sessions 3 and 4 was the church as the body of Christ as described by Paul in 1 Cor 12:12–31. Participant 1 spoke on behalf of their breakout group in session 4, observing that they do not think full autonomy of congregations is healthy for the movement. There is a drift in associating with Churches of Christ in some instances and a need for corporate solidarity with our identity as a movement.¹⁵ These comments were held in tension with what had been expressed in earlier sessions about the importance of valuing diversity within our unity as Christians across multiple congregations that are self-governed. In the final session, when discussing the limited capacity of congregations to have missional impact in their communities, Participant 3 concluded that “autonomy is our problem.”¹⁶

In the first two sessions, the group was hesitant about the concept of unity of congregations within the movement with participants raising questions about what is meant by unity. After some discussion, the team decided unity did not mean conformity of belief but unity of missional purpose and identity. Participant 5 said, “Diversity is key to the unity conversation.”¹⁷ Two sessions later, participant 4 said, “The plea for unity is not as strong now as it was.”¹⁸ A number of factors were discussed including our

15. Field notes, session 4.

16. Field notes, session 8.

17. Field notes, session 2.

18. Field notes, session 4.

different cultural context and congregations' lack of desire to look beyond survival in their own geographical settings. Participant 4 proposed that we hold theological beliefs as lightly as possible so we can work more effectively together in service of God's mission. Participant 3 suggested, "There is a unity of faith in all of the congregations. We can't separate when all are united by the Spirit of God and have common faith, but we are still, in some areas, diverse. We may need to create more structure to know how to work together."¹⁹ Participants 5 and 6 affirmed this suggestion with participant 6 adding that Churches of Christ have a misunderstanding of autonomy, which drives an expression of independence among congregations. They went on to say that there needs to be a balance of interdependence and autonomy, which is the tension of being a movement of associated congregations. Participant 3 stated that our unity is based on a mutual love for God and for one another. We are drawn together in relationship. We have a common faith yet express that faith in a diversity of ways.²⁰

The conversation at the heart of ecclesiological formation focused around the practice of communion. Participant 2 indicated that when the Apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthian church about the practice of sharing in the Lord's Supper, he was addressing their lack of unity, which denied the body of Christ.²¹ Participant 4 added that communion reconstitutes us as a community of Christ. Participating in communion

19. Field notes, session 4.

20. Field notes, session 4.

21. Field notes, session 5.

reminds us that it is not just about our own life but life together, participating in the life of God.²²

Ecclesial life together in the economy of God's kingdom was talked about again in session 7 when the team discussed the participation of all people in the ministry of the church. This is a celebration of the diversity of the body of Christ united in the service of God's mission. Participant 7 acknowledged that unity requires an openness and vulnerability towards one another with a mutual accountability to God and one another.²³ Participant 5 found this conversation "exhilarating" because their experience, even within their own congregation, was that they were not "priests to one another." "From a movement perspective in South Australia, we could all minister to one another rather than be protective of our own patch. Ministers don't trust each other; we don't want to be vulnerable."²⁴ Participant 7 responded by citing that the constitution for the association of congregations in South Australia binds us together and should be an embodiment of the perichoretic dance. The team concluded that unity within the Churches of Christ context is not about conformity in any way but is an expression of the diversity of the body of Christ and a reflection of the diversity of the Trinity. Ecclesiological formation, both locally and corporately as a movement, has its essence in the perichoretic image of God.

Trinitarian Theology

The subtheme that strengthened the conversation about unity and gave it depth was Trinitarian theology presented as *perichoresis*. I introduced *perichoresis* as a way to

22. Field notes, session 5.

23. Field notes, session 7.

24. Field notes, session 7, participant 5.

describe the Trinity in session 1, but it continued to be a natural thread that emerged in conversations throughout the sessions. Participant 2 imagined what the church could look like if we had a Trinitarian image like *perichoresis* that shaped our ecclesiology. “At the heart of the Godhead is relationship. There has always been three persons. This is supposed to be the primary description of God. The doctrine of the Trinity affects every other aspect of Christianity.”²⁵ Participant 3 said, “It all starts with God who is love. The relationship within the Godhead is relational to one another and us. Receiving love from God impacts people. God is diverse, and we are a diversity of people grafted into the body of Christ.”²⁶ Participant 5 affirmed these statements by saying that the plurality of God ought to be expressed within us as the church.

In sessions 3 and 4, different participants highlighted from time to time that unity is not the mission. It is participation in the mission of God that unites the church. This was articulated in several ways. Participant 5 stated that participation in the perichoretic dance is expressed through communion. Participant 6 said we join the dance by being baptized, and in our baptism the whole community of faith joins in. Participant 7 said we miss out on the dance if we fail to love one another as we contribute to the ministry of the church.²⁷ These practices within the life of the congregation were all discussed within the framework of participating in the perichoretic life of God.

The nature of what forms an identity for a diverse church was summed up by participant 3 in two ways. First, the church understands that God is love and that we find

25. Field notes, session 3.

26. Field notes, session 3.

27. Field notes, sessions 5, 6, and 7.

our being in the self-giving, kenotic love of God. Second, we find our orientation as a church in the confession that Jesus is Lord, and through Jesus, we are drawn into this love. “Our unity and togetherness is based on mutual love.”²⁸ Participants 4 and 7 strongly affirmed God’s self-giving love as the impetus for the formation of the church in such a way that we cannot help but want to share in mutual love for one another across congregations.

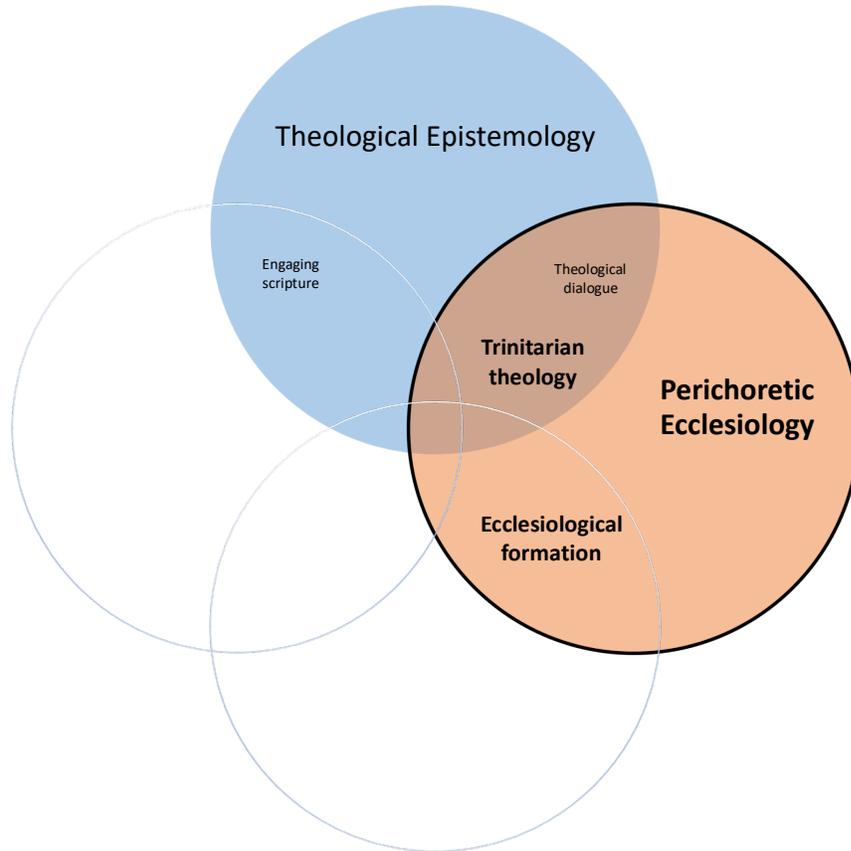
There has already been a theological rationale articulated in the data that offers a biblically based framework for considering the nature of the church. I have named this theme “perichoretic ecclesiology” because the data reveal a high engagement with the idea that an epistemology of *perichoresis* helps frame why the congregations ought to lean into a unity that embodies the love of God through their belief and practice. The team concluded that it was the perichoretic nature of God that sets the context for an appreciation of diversity within the unity of the church. *Perichoresis* enlivened conversations about the sacramental life of the church, its missional expression, and the corporate identity of Churches of Christ in South Australia.

In the development of the study guide, the team decided that it would be helpful to highlight our unity and participation in the life of God in a couple of different ways. First, at the beginning of each study, we articulated why the topic matters and how it emerged as a touchstone for the movement in order to draw congregations into our common story. Secondly, we are inviting participants into conversation and participation in God’s story. Missional practices integrated into two of the studies encourage cooperation with other congregations, listening, and practicing love towards one another.

28. Field notes, session 3.

The addition of the second theme with subthemes, as shown in Figure 4, begins to display visually how the themes overlap and relate to one another.

Figure 4. *Perichoretic Ecclesiology*



Missional Participation

The third theme identified in the data was mission. This is expected because the other major focus of this project is the revitalization of the missional nature of Churches of Christ in South Australia. This was discussed within two major subthemes: God's mission and how we participate in mission. I decided to represent this data under the theme of missional participation, using codes such as mission, participation, and revitalization, plus emerging codes such as social justice and programs.

God's Mission

The team deliberated about the definition of *mission* early in the first session when participant 3 asked, “What is mission?”²⁹ Two key assumptions were explored. Mission is an activity of God in the world, and mission is a program of the church. Adding to the comment I highlighted under theological epistemology about the anemia of theological reflection regarding mission, participant 4 said there has been no clear theological rationale for mission given in their experience of ministry.³⁰

In session 2, the team picked up on this thread. Participant 3 articulated that they saw their role in this process as contributing to developing a theology of mission that engenders a missional focus for Churches of Christ congregations.³¹ As the conversation about mission developed throughout the intervention, there were concerns raised about mission being viewed as simply a program of the church that serves the community. The concerns were about an absence of theological reflection, lack of proclamation about the Christian faith, and becoming stuck in a cycle of running programs without considering if this is what God is still calling the congregation to do.³² In session 4, participant 6 responded to another participant's comment about why congregations do not work together in mission like they used to, saying, “What causes us to not want to be together? God's mission plays out in a broader kingdom context. We've lost a sense of God's mission so we are still looking at the smaller aspect of local mission programs.... We

29. Field notes, session 1.

30. Field notes, session 1.

31. Field notes, session 2.

32. Field notes, sessions 1, 2, and 3.

forgot that mission comes from God.”³³ Participant 5 responded, “The mission program is not the goal. God is.”³⁴

The mission of God began to be articulated more explicitly later in the intervention. Participants discussed the nature of God’s mission as expressed through communion and baptism. Participant 2 discussed how the tradition behind the Lord’s Supper is the missional witness of the community of faith to the story of God’s saving work. Participant 1 asked, “How can we have the Lord’s Supper and ignore the beggar?”³⁵ Participant 5 said baptism is a missional activity and proclamation to the world. In the following session, participant 7 said the act of baptism moves us into participation with the mission of God.³⁶

It was clear from the initial inquiry into mission and the participants’ observations of how congregations participate in activity identified as missional that the team moved in the direction of articulating mission as an activity of God derived from God rather than a program the church creates. Participant 7 declared in the final session that they hoped the study guide would offer a “transformational experience of participating in the mission of God.”³⁷

Participation in Mission

The hope articulated by the team through the intervention is that the study guide they produced would increase the participation of congregations in God’s missional

33. Field notes, session 4.

34. Field notes, session 4.

35. Field notes, session 5.

36. Field notes, sessions 5 and 6.

37. Field notes, session 8.

activity in the world. They wanted to shift the focus from programs to integrated habits that transform the nature of the church.

Participant 6 indicated their hope that an increased participation in God's mission would promote unity across Churches of Christ in South Australia.³⁸ This was echoed by participant 5 later in the session and again in session 4. Participant 4 advocated for more engagement between congregations, starting with an awareness of God's mission, which would promote more missional behavior and a growing sense of interdependence within the movement in order to participate in God's mission effectively.³⁹ The team acknowledged that participation is a strength within their congregations. Everyone is called to participate, but the team articulated participation in God's mission differently than how they had seen it practiced in the past.

Participants 1, 3, and 6 talked about empowering the imagination of the people of God to see that the Spirit of God is at work within them in their everyday lives. Their concern is that church programs named as mission drain the energy out of congregations where people resources are depleted. Participant 6 suggested that people in congregations could be encouraged to ask themselves how they are already participating in God's mission, especially if, through our study guide, we are able to stimulate an imagination about what God is up to in the world. "Leave space for God to move. It may not be in church terms but what we do elsewhere."⁴⁰

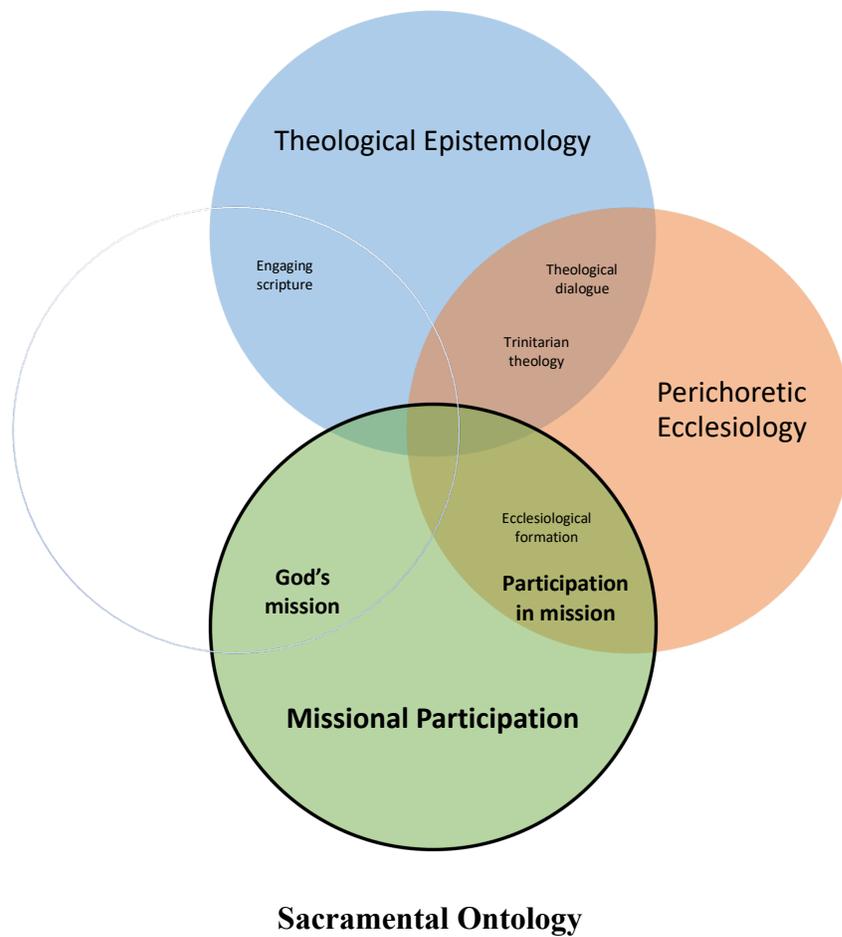
38. Field notes, session 3.

39. Field notes, session 4.

40. Field notes, session 7, participant 6.

Missional participation became a key feature of the study guide with participation integrated into each of the studies. The team determined that if we want to influence the missional nature of congregations, there needs to be a missional practice integrated into each study and an opportunity to reflect on that practice. The missional practice is intentionally not programmatic in nature and is designed to develop *habitus*. Figure 5 integrates the third theme with its subthemes.

Figure 5. *Missional Participation*



Even though the intervention intentionally drew the team’s focus toward the sacramental practices of Churches of Christ, I did not originally anticipate the emergence of this theme. It needs to be noted, because sacramental practices emerged in seven out of

eight sessions with the most common code being the Lord's Supper (communion). I decided to discuss this data under the subthemes of ordinances and transformation as there were a number of conversations about the presence of God in communion, baptism, and the ministry of believers. Emerging codes included discipleship, catechesis, and identity. I have named this theme sacramental ontology because the data revealed the significance of the formation that occurs in the sacred practices (ordinances) of the church where the mystery of God is encountered.

Ordinances

Communion and baptism were referred to together early in the intervention. In each reference, baptism by immersion was discussed as a qualification to have communion with an acknowledgement that this is no longer a requirement in most congregations today. As discussed under the theme of perichoretic ecclesiology, communion was talked about as an open table in Churches of Christ congregations today, where the people of God find their unity together in Christ. Participant 2 added that communion is where we experience the presence of Christ, and participant 4 said it is where we are invited into the life of the Trinity.⁴¹ Participant 5 advocated for an open table because it promotes the unity of the church. Participants 2 and 4 engaged this conversation by affirming that communion is about responding to Jesus's invitation as host; therefore, we do not exclude. Participant 7 raised a concern that perhaps the holiness and sacramental nature of communion has diminished over time in some contexts. Participant 2 responded with a reflection about the Didache of the early church

41. Field notes, session 5.

preparing people to participate in the holy sacrament. At this point, participant 4 suggested 1 Cor 11:17–34 as a Bible study to be integrated into the study guide.⁴²

The team also discussed the significance of baptism by immersion as an important sacrament in the life of the church. However, they lamented that it is not something we see a lot of in our congregations today. Participant 5 said:

The process of baptism itself is an image of death, burial, and resurrection. For us, it's a public commemoration, an announcement that from now on it is no longer I who lives but Christ lives in me. I'm not just a church member; it's a decision to lay down your life for Jesus. Baptism is serious, beyond just going to church. It says I am taking this seriously. Living for Christ.⁴³

This sparked a conversation in the team about ensuring baptism is included in the study guide.

The group also discussed the nature of the mutual ministry of all believers as sacramental. Participant 7 stated that God's presence is in the body of Christ as we participate in the mission of God together. Participants 3 and 6 talked about how participating in the priesthood together develops a spiritual maturity if we are willing to submit to God and one another.⁴⁴

Transformation

Transformation appeared most frequently in sessions 5 to 7. The team talked about the transformational nature of God's presence in communion, baptism, and the priesthood of all believers. This led to some deeper conversations about how the community of faith finds their identity and being in the community of the Triune God.

42. Field notes, session 5.

43. Field notes, session 6.

44. Field notes, session 7.

Participant 4 said that sharing in “communion is not just about our own life but life together as a community. Communion reminds us and reconstitutes us as a community.”⁴⁵ This provided some helpful orientation for the team to discuss the transformational nature of the church’s participation in the sacraments. Participant 1 linked this to participation in God’s mission, saying, “When we share in the Lord’s Supper, we anticipate the eschatological nature of God’s kingdom unfolding here and now, which includes us.”⁴⁶

When the conversation turned to baptism being an outcome of one of the studies, participant 1 said that they wanted to shift the conversation from getting people into pews on Sunday to how baptism invites people to live a transformed life incorporated into the perichoretic dance. Participant 7 affirmed that believers’ baptism communicates the “transformational nature of faith in the outworking of baptism.”⁴⁷

Participants 6 and 7 discussed how the presence of God in the mutual ministry of all believers transforms us.⁴⁸ An outgrowth of this discussion was a practice that was built into the final topic of the study guide, asking people to consider how their participation in the life of the church engenders an act of submission to God as they participate in the perichoretic dance and open themselves to ongoing transformation.

The conversations I have identified under the theme of sacramental ontology informed the last three topics and practices for the study guide. As people engage with

45. Field notes, session 5.

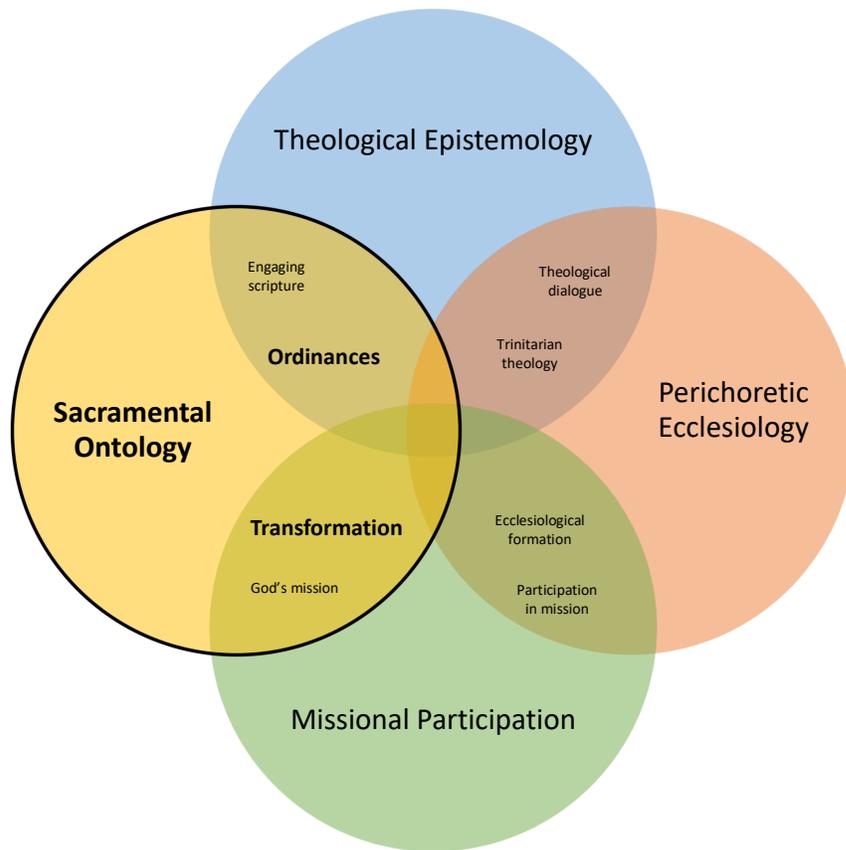
46. Field notes, session 5.

47. Field notes, session 6.

48. Field notes, session 7.

sacramental practices within Churches of Christ congregations, they will find their being and ongoing transformation in the dynamic life of the Triune God. The fourth theme with subthemes completes the intersecting circles as shown in Figure 6.

Figure 6. *Sacramental Ontology*



God's Agency

The final theme emerging from the data, God's agency, was not stated as explicitly as other themes but is rather an undercurrent throughout the data. This theme began to take shape halfway through the first session when a conversation between participants 2, 3, 4, and 6 developed about ministers discerning how to innovate in congregational leadership. Participant 6 talked about the importance of allowing

Scripture to read us so we can hear from God in new ways. Participant 3 added, “An important principle as a starting point for ministers is to acknowledge that the Spirit of God is amongst people of God. The minister’s role is to encourage a discovery of the Spirit to inspire because the Spirit is witness to what God is doing among us.”⁴⁹ The quote “the Spirit of God is among the people of God” emerged in the data through sessions 4 and 7 as an orienting reminder to the team that mission is in response to God’s dynamic activity.

In most sessions, different participants used phrases such as “God’s actions,” “agency of God,” “God is active,” “movement of God,” and “presence of God” to describe a dynamic beyond human activity at work in the world and in the church. In session 3, participants began to criticize the reliance of the church on human agency to program mission as a way to stimulate relevance in the community without active theological reflection. Participant 1 said, “We rely too heavily on human agency over God’s agency.” Participant 4 suggested that “maybe we don’t expect that God is still acting and speaking to us today.” Participant 7 said that the problem with calling programed activity mission is that it encourages churches to tick a box and then abdicate the responsibility to attend to theological reflection.⁵⁰

While participants talked about the presence of God in the practice of communion and baptism by immersion in sessions 5 and 6, the conversation about God’s agency for

49. Field notes, session 1. Participant 3 credited Alan Roxburgh for the quote, “The Spirit of God is among the people of God.” This reflects what is stated by Alan Roxburgh and Fred Romanuk in *The Missional Leader*, “God’s future is among the regular, ordinary people of God.” Alan Roxburgh and Fred Romanuk, *The Missional Leader: Equipping Your Church to Reach a Changing World* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2009), 20.

50. Field notes, session 3.

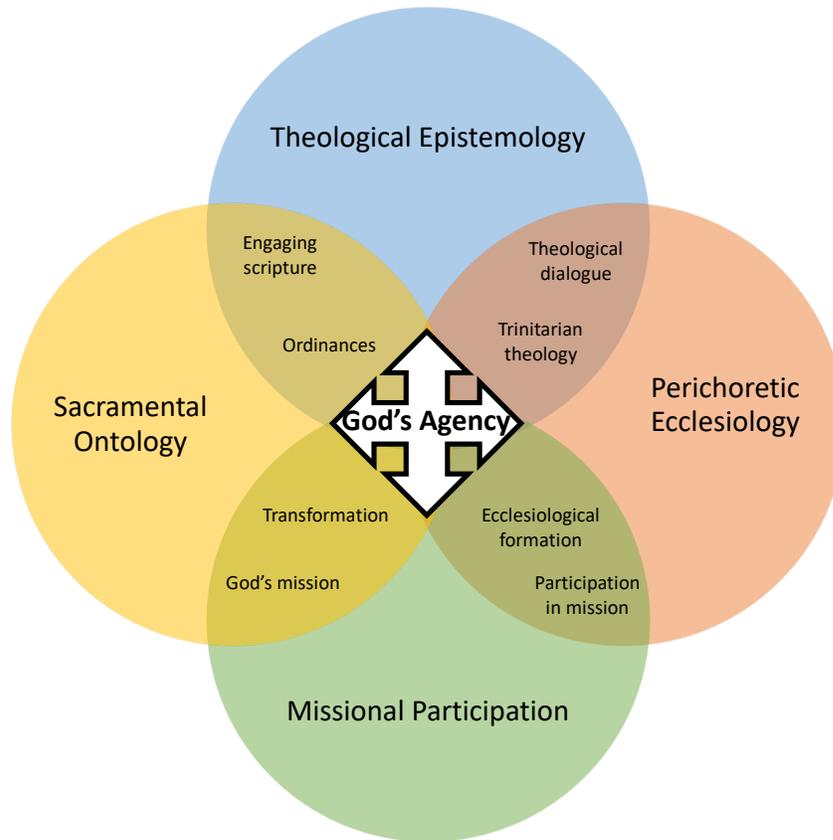
missional revitalization picked up energy in sessions 3 and 7. In session 7, the team discussed how the perichoretic dance is an expression of God's agency, inviting the participation of all believers in mission. Participant 6 emphasized the need to enable people in congregations to acknowledge how they are already participating in God's mission and the "need to leave space for God to move."⁵¹

The team decided that God's agency needed to be a thread throughout the study guide. In each study, there are opportunities to participate in activities and engage with questions that bring an awareness of God's agency to the surface for reflection. Participant 7 said that this enables the study to be transformational rather than simply transactional so people can "experience participation in the work of God."⁵² The final theme is added to the center of the diagram because all themes are informed by the agency of God (see figure 7).

51. Field notes, session 7.

52. Field notes, session 8.

Figure 7. *Framework of Themes and Subthemes*



Evaluation

So far, I have discussed the contributions of the research and development team along with my own interpretations to identify key themes emerging from the data. Contributions from the team in the first seven sessions resulted in a draft copy of a study guide I titled *Movement and Identity: Participating in the Life of God's Mission*.⁵³ The finalization of this document was a collaborative effort of the team through the Google Document in the week following session 7.

53. See Appendix J.

Once the team was satisfied with the final draft, I emailed a PDF of the study guide to each team member along with the outside observer questionnaire.⁵⁴ Each team member was asked to identify two to three members of their congregation (at least one person in church leadership and one not in a leadership role) to read the study guide and respond to the questionnaire anonymously. This selection of outside observers was to strengthen the trustworthiness of the triangulation methods for this project. Each team member was responsible for briefing outside observers on the study guide and what was required in responding to the questionnaire. The study guide and questionnaire were offered as either physical or digital copies for evaluation. Outside observers were given two weeks to complete the questionnaire.

The research and development team emailed digital responses or handed physical copies to me when we gathered for our eighth and final session. During session 8, each team member was given a copy of the study guide along with the research and development team questionnaire for their own evaluation.⁵⁵ I provided pens for those who wanted to complete the hard copy questionnaire. Participants who wanted to complete the questionnaire digitally had been instructed to bring their own device. Each team member was given one hour to complete the questionnaire.

Outside Observers

A total of seventeen questionnaires were received from seven congregations, contributing comprehensive data for evaluation. There were significant points of convergence and divergence regarding the content and effectiveness of the study guide.

54. See Appendix H.

55. See Appendix G.

These will be discussed with reference to the two major goals of the project: constructing a theological framework and revitalizing the missional nature of the church. Then, the strengths, weaknesses, and other observations of the study guide, as reflected in the questionnaires, will be discussed.

A Theological Framework

Outside observers offered an overwhelming affirmation that the study guide would be a helpful resource for constructing a theological framework for their congregation. Ten people offered comprehensive feedback in this area, stating that they thought the study guide offered solid grounding about the theological principles and beliefs that underpin Churches of Christ as a movement. There was affirmation of the use of Scripture as the method for drawing focus to the theological commitments of Churches of Christ. Observers thought the study guide was excellent, useful, informative, and clear; reflected a diversity of thinking; and would be essential for addressing theological foundations for Churches of Christ.

One observer said they did not think this study guide would be helpful for constructing a theological framework in their congregation. They qualified this by saying they thought the study guide was not designed for the general congregation and was pitched towards church leadership or students of theology and therefore would not be effective unless there was a skilled facilitator leading the study. This observation was shared by two others, who offered affirmation but said that the language was a little advanced or it was a bit wordy.

Missional Revitalization

While most observers anticipated the study guide would help revitalize the missional nature of their congregation, the majority of comments were limited to beliefs rather than practice. Two observers offered comprehensive feedback, saying that the study guide offered a good framework for the congregation to assess their missional direction. They believed it would revitalize missional outcomes for their congregation. Another person stated that this study guide would help stimulate a conversation about missional participation in their congregation. Another said it would help people understand how to participate in God's missional work.

One person disagreed that the study guide would lead to missional revitalization, and three people were not sure. The person who disagreed did not offer any further explanation. Others expressed hesitation due to a potential lack of willingness of people to participate. One observer stated, "The term *mission* needs to be clarified as many understand it still to refer to people going to other countries."⁵⁶ Others indicated that there was a lack of awareness of local mission. Some saw an opportunity to educate people through the study guide, while others were not as optimistic.

Strengths, Weaknesses, and Observations

One of the strengths identified in the study guide was the integration of Scripture for every study to help participants discuss core theological beliefs that resonate with the movement. Linked to this was the emphasis on participating in studies with others, "promoting participants to look at how they interact with each other."⁵⁷ People

56. Outside observer questionnaire, observer 14.

57. Outside observer questionnaire, observer 9.

commented on the value of reading Scripture with others as a means to promote togetherness, acceptance of others, listening to differing points of view, and building a sense of unity within the church. The structure of the study was a strength with many commenting that six studies was an appropriate number of topics and that the rhythm of engaging each study across two sittings was welcomed. Two observers stated that the invitation to come back to the conversation was not stated clearly for each study. When I went back over the study guide, I realized that two studies did not have this explicitly stated. This is a helpful amendment to implement for further development. People generally found the segments within each study—discover, engage, and participate—a helpful way to guide the curriculum, making it accessible and engaging.

The main weakness that was identified related to the ability of people to participate in the study. The observers were divided on whom this study might be most appropriate for and how accessible it would be for different people. Eleven observers stated that they thought the study guide would be a great resource for all members of the church and could even be utilized with people who are new to their congregation. However, five observers explicitly stated that they thought the study guide was pitched at a church leadership level. Some said the language and concepts were a little beyond the regular congregation member and could exclude people from participation. Others said that they believed people's willingness to engage would depend on how the study guide was presented to the church. One other potential weakness, observed by three people, was that the study assumes people understand the concept of mission. One person asked that mission be explained more clearly in the introduction to the study guide.

Other observations indicated hope that the study guide would instill a sense of “pride in the movement” because it would build confidence in knowing who we are. This was also articulated as a meaning-making exercise for congregations because it draws people into conversation about things that are central to Churches of Christ in South Australia. Most participants indicated that they look forward to engaging with the study guide in their local contexts when it is available.

Research and Development Team

Seven ministers participated in the research and development team for the duration of the intervention. The questionnaire was designed to guide them to evaluate the study guide they produced with reference to the process itself. Unlike the observers who evaluated the study guide individually, the team participated in group dialogue to produce the study guide, so one of the questions asked about the experience of developing a theological framework. This evaluation will be discussed with reference to the experience of participating in dialogue to develop a theological framework; how the study guide contributes to missional vitality; and strengths, weaknesses, and observations.

Constructing a Framework through Theological Dialogue

Six participants affirmed that the process of developing a theological framework was a rich and engaging experience. One participant said that while it was not a negative experience, it was not overly inspiring due to the fact that there was a lot of agreement on what the group deemed essential theological foundations. This participant said they would “welcome a conversation with a bit more heat as it would show what we are

talking about is important.”⁵⁸ Other participants said they enjoyed discussing a theological framework with people who had different perspectives. Participants generally felt the basic theological foundations shaping who we are were covered. One participant said they appreciated the introduction of a Trinitarian theology as a guiding principle.

Another participant said:

As we proceeded through the studies, it became clear that people’s perspectives were not that much different to my own. The parts that were different was personal to each person and help to grow and see God in many different ways. As we explored the differences, God became bigger and the gap of differing perspectives became smaller.⁵⁹

Missional Vitality

Most participants qualified their comments about missional vitality within the capacity to articulate a theological framework. There were repeated comments about rediscovering foundational principles and understanding what we believe so that participation in God’s mission is appropriately inspired. The general consensus was that missional participation flows from guided theological reflection. Participant 3 warned that if the study guide is simply an epistemological exercise, then it will miss the mark. Yet, if the study guide is presented as an opportunity for missional engagement, there will likely be a greater opportunity for missional revitalization.

Participants agreed that the study guide brings mission to the forefront of the conversation in a way that engages people in the activity of God. Participant 4 expressed a hope that engagement with the study guide would renew enthusiasm for participating in “God-inspired missional initiatives.” A couple of participants indicated they were

58. Research and development team questionnaire, participant 3.

59. Research and development team questionnaire, participant 2.

concerned about a lack of missional awareness in their congregations and hoped the study guide would help encourage this. Participant 3 highlighted the inherent assumption in the study guide that people have a general understanding of God's mission. They wondered whether there needed to be a more explicit exploration of mission or even a "prequel" study guide about mission.

Strengths, Weaknesses, and Observations

There was a consensus among the participants that the study guide is comprehensive yet not too long and that the curriculum design is a strength. The group also agreed that a strength of the study guide is that it offers theological orientation around the distinctive principles of Churches of Christ and is not simply a theoretical exercise but draws people into spiritual practices and missional engagement.

The main weakness considered by participants is that the study guide might be a bit too advanced or academic for general use. Four participants expressed their concern that participation in the study guide would require a competent or trained leader with a level of maturity and experience with Churches of Christ. Not all congregations will have access to such a person.

An additional observation made by three participants was a desire to see the study guide used by churches who are inducting new members or educating people about Churches of Christ. Participant 4 added that ministers could use it for a preaching series.

Patterns, Slippages, and Silences

My voice provided one research angle through the handouts that stimulated conversation for each session. My role as a participant researcher in the group also contributed to this research angle. Another angle was the input of the research and

development team throughout the sessions and in the evaluation of the study guide. The third research angle was the outside observers' evaluation of the study guide.

Triangulating the data revealed overlapping patterns, along with slippages where there was divergence in the data, and silences where something emerged that I did not anticipate or where something that I did anticipate was not stated explicitly.⁶⁰

Patterns

A pattern that was consistent through the intervention and evaluation was agreement on the need for a theological framework. The data revealed convergence on the methodology for constructing a theological framework, which included engagement with Scripture in conversation with others to strengthen theological reflection. Another pattern that emerged was the desire among participants and observers to promote interdependency and unity within Churches of Christ. There was also convergence across the data where people anticipated that engaging in the study guide would help develop a more dynamic relationship with God and a confidence to participate in mission. The triangulated data confirmed a gap between epistemological statements of faith and missional practice and indicated that mission needs to be emphasized.

Slippages

One of the main slippages identified is that people did not have as much of an awareness of mission as I had hoped. I had made some assumptions about how mission might be understood theologically. In the first session of the intervention and then in the questionnaires completed by the development team and outside observers, questions were

60. Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, 306–10.

raised about the meaning of the term mission. Both asked for further clarification of what was meant by mission, indicating this would be beneficial for the study guide.

Another slippage is in the assumption I made about the capacity of people to engage with the study guide. There was divergence in the data over whether what had been produced is accessible to all people in Churches of Christ congregations in South Australia. Responding to the evaluation of the study guide, the development team and outside observers were divided over whether the study guide would be user friendly for general congregation members or only for those with certain knowledge and ability to lead the study.

Silences

A silence that has not been adequately addressed emerged in a conversation in session 4 about defining what we mean when we talk about the gospel. The person who raised this was referring to a public meeting five years earlier where the same question was raised but not adequately discussed. There was not a lot of discussion in the session other than acknowledging there are nuanced ways we talk about the gospel. This is almost hidden in the data, as there is an undercurrent of people wanting to define theological commitments for Churches of Christ. While there was satisfaction that we have given appropriate attention to the task of articulating theological principles for Churches of Christ in South Australia, there are still unanswered questions that remain about what we mean when we use particular terms.

Another silence I have noticed is the explicit absence of the invitation to reflect on experiences in the study guide. This was assumed, but as I reflect through the results, I can see this component to the study guide is missing. To explicitly add “reflect” as a

fourth movement in the curriculum would assist the task of revitalization. Observers mentioned transformation in the context of participating in mission, but transformation requires a couple of things. First, the invitation to participate in an experience. Secondly, in order to truly have an experience, that experience needs to be reflected on. Effective transformation cannot take place unless one reflects on the experience and integrates it. I think this is assumed in the data, but it is a silence that needs to be explicitly stated.

Summary

This chapter began with articulating five emergent themes from the data collected in field notes during the research and development team sessions. I have shown how these themes informed the development of a study guide constructing a theological framework that revitalizes the missional nature of Churches of Christ in South Australia. By inviting the development team and outside observers to evaluate the study guide, I was able to triangulate the data for points of convergence and divergence to assess its effectiveness.

I learned that while there is resonance about the theological framework, questions remain about the definition of mission and what kind of revitalization this might promote. I also learned that not everyone is convinced that this study guide will be accessible to all members of congregations due to the complexity of language and themes in parts of the studies. However, there was general optimism that the study guide contains what is needed to stimulate a meaningful conversation for Churches of Christ in order to develop a theological framework that revitalizes the nature of mission.

In the next chapter, I will discuss my interpretations of the results and the significance this project could have in my ministry context.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

Inquiry into this project began with an identified problem for Churches of Christ in South Australia: there is no clear theological framework that articulates who we are and sets foundations for revitalizing the nature of mission. One of the key challenges for the association of congregations is that there is no binding statement of belief and therefore a diversity of theological expressions exists. Misunderstanding about God's mission and how to participate in it is compounded by a lack of intentional theological reflection in dialogue with Scripture and each other. In the previous chapters, I have described how I set out to address the identified problem. I have proposed a theological rationale for understanding the nature of God and how this revitalizes the nature of mission for the church. I used participatory action research by inviting a group of ministers from congregations to become a research and development team with me as the primary researcher to develop a study guide that congregations can use as a theological framework that revitalizes mission. By collecting data from the perspectives of myself as the researcher, the research and development team, and outside observers from congregations as evaluators of the study guide, I triangulated the data from field notes and questionnaires.

In this final chapter, I will interpret what has emerged from the data and propose a theological framework that revitalizes the missional nature of Churches of Christ in South

Australia. I will also consider the trustworthiness of this intervention and reflect on its significance and possible implications.

Interpretations

Findings in the previous chapter identified key themes that emerged from the coded data. Convergence of these themes was affirmed in the evaluation of the artifact by the development team and outside observers. My assumption that bringing together ministers from Churches of Christ congregations would produce a study guide that represented theological themes members of congregations would resonate with was confirmed. I believe the methodology of this intervention was the most effective way to elicit interest, promote theological dialogue, and construct a theological framework. The curriculum design of the artifact shaped a way to practice the theological framework, which is intended to revitalize the missional nature of congregations.

Some threads continued to emerge throughout the intervention. One of these was the tension regarding a definition of *mission*. At times during the intervention and in response to questionnaires, a lack of theological reflection about mission was revealed. A participant asked for a definition at the beginning of the intervention, and outside observers did not have a comprehensive understanding of mission other than it being a program only the selected few participate in. There was also a tension in defining theological beliefs. Participants wanted to respect diversity while affirming unity and hold definitions lightly. It was important to the development team that we were able to say something about God together, but the underlying commitment was to allow Scripture to speak and for the agency of God to be revealed. The presentation of a

Trinitarian theology to guide the theological framework was appreciated by insiders and outsiders who evaluated the artifact.

When a participant in the development team suggested that our task of constructing a theological framework begins with an experience of God, my assertions in chapter 2 were affirmed. An awareness of the agency of God is critical for revitalizing mission.¹ God's agency was not discussed as much as other themes, but this code emerged in every session. The development team and outside observers affirmed Scripture as a starting point for constructing a theological framework. It was also agreed that dialogue with one another, tradition, context, and seeking the agency of God were important for moving beyond static faith statements. Participating in theology is a dynamic exercise that invites ongoing development of thinking about God and participating in God's mission.

In chapter 1, I presented Richard Osmer's tasks for practical theological interpretation as a method for analyzing my ministry context. As I reflected through the emergent themes and the artifact, it was appropriate to bring Osmer's tasks back into view as I interpreted my findings. The tasks articulated by Osmer are descriptive, interpretive, normative, and pragmatic. With these in mind, I began to visualize how the themes and subthemes from the findings of the intervention shape a theological framework that can revitalize the nature of mission.

Figure 7 represents the major themes in intersecting circles with the exception of God's agency, which is central to all themes. The themes overlap because they were often discussed in relationship to one another. Making sense of theology is not isolated to one

1. Field notes, session 2, participant 3.

single task; it is a combination of multiple tasks initiated by the activity of God. The nature of God is perichoretic, which means there is an ongoing dynamic and kenotic process of God's self-revelation in all aspects of the life of the church. Therefore, the task of constructing a theological framework begins with the activity of God, and the outcome is a deeper relationship between God and God's people.

I have considered how the data have converged and where the themes and subthemes inform this framework. Beginning with the upper right quadrant, the sources that inform how we think about God shape how Christian community is formed. As I considered the subthemes, theological dialogue and trinitarian theology converge. Studying Scripture together reveals the nature of who God is and how the community of faith is constituted. The subthemes emerged when the development team talked about engagement with Scripture as an important descriptive task. The team discussed that this must be done in dialogue with other hermeneutical sources, including tradition, contemporary contexts, and reading Scripture with others. Osmer refers to this task as a hermeneutical trajectory that helps "Christians interpret their faith in ways that are meaningful and relevant."² The first study in the artifact draws attention to the task of reading Scripture together. The first stage of each study is titled "Discover" because it is an exercise in bringing hermeneutical sources into theological dialogue to talk about God in context.

Meaning making is reflected in the lower right quadrant. This is an interpretative exercise that brings thinking about God into dialogue with how Christian community is formed as a reflection of God's missional nature. The development team talked at length

2. Osmer, "Empirical," 69.

in sessions 3 and 4 about how the nature of the Trinity shapes the church for mission, which is an outworking of God’s love. The subthemes, participating in mission and ecclesiological formation, converge because this is how Christian community takes shape as a message of God’s love in the world—by becoming the gospel. Osmer offers a transforming praxis trajectory that shapes a “general approach to the theory-practice relationship.”³ With that trajectory in mind, the second stage for each study is named “Engage” as a way to prime deeper engagement with theory that is interpreted into practice.

The lower left quadrant reflects the active response of the Christian community as they live out their identity in the Triune God. *Perichoresis* invites participation in the life of God’s mission. This quadrant reflects what Osmer refers to as the Neo-Aristotelian trajectory, which “draw[s] on Aristotle’s understanding of phronesis to describe [an] understanding of the theory-praxis relationship.”⁴ The artifact draws this into focus in the third stage of each study, named “Participate.” The subthemes of God’s mission and transformation converge because participation in God’s mission is how the wisdom gained from theory is tested in practice and becomes the normative task of practicing theology. It is also a context for learning through new experiences of God in practice. The artifact is designed to promote missional revitalization through this stage.

This leads to the upper left quadrant, which invites a response to God’s mission in ways that transform God’s people ontologically. When the church gathers for worship, there are opportunities for reflection on how participation in God’s mission invites our

3. Osmer, “Empirical,” 72.

4. Osmer, “Empirical,” 72.

ongoing response as disciples of Jesus. Osmer calls this the confessional trajectory, which brings experiences of the world into a dynamic relationship with the worship practices of the church.⁵ The fourth study in the artifact is a good example of this, where experiences of table fellowship are brought into conversation with the practice of communion. The studies in the artifact suggest a final movement of practicing theory, then coming back together to reflect on that practice. There are important resources that inform this task. These are named in the subthemes of Scripture and ordinances which converge for the reflective task. The pragmatic task is in forming new and sustained responses to how the Christian experience is impacted by the dynamic agency of God. While not explicitly stated in the artifact, this stage is named “Reflect.”

Osmer’s tasks and trajectories for practical theological interpretation have assisted me in interpreting how the themes inform a practical theological framework that can revitalize the missional nature of Churches of Christ. Bringing the themes into conversation with these tasks helps ground them as practical considerations. They inform how the research and development team suggest the formation of Churches of Christ congregations could take place. This provides a methodology for how we think about God, form Christian community as a reflection of who God is, participate in God’s mission, and observe how God’s mission continues to transform God’s people for renewed action.

Figure 8 displays how I have conceptualized the framework for practicing theology through each study in the artifact. The research and development team was consistent in talking about how God’s activity informs our thinking about God, being a

5. Osmer, “Empirical,” 73.

community of God's people, participating in God's mission, and being transformed by our encounters with God through sacramental practices.

Figure 8. *Study Guide Framework*



The perichoretic context of the Triune God is revealed in all aspects of this framework. God is interdependent, self-giving of love, and self-emptying into the life of the church, inviting participation in an eschatological mission. God's being and God's mission ontologically shape the church as a dynamic community of God's people.

Trustworthiness

Applicability

In order to determine the trustworthiness of a project intervention, Sensing suggests its general application in other contexts should be considered.⁶ Sensing also suggests that a deeper understanding of the intervention itself can increase the possibility of applying the intervention in other contexts.⁷ A desired outcome of qualitative research for this project is that it has pragmatic applicability.

The delimitations and limitations set out in chapter 1 provided some boundaries for this intervention, so I will start with reflecting on the applicability of this project for Churches of Christ in South Australia. I first engaged this project with a view to stimulate theological dialogue among people with divergent views. My hope in doing this was to remove barriers to congregations working together for missional revitalization. I invited a group of ministers into this exercise out of which we produced a study guide to be used in congregations. The study guide was evaluated by members of congregations with a strong affirmation of its applicability to leadership groups and study groups in the life of a church. While there was general applicability for Churches of Christ congregations within South Australia, some key limitations exist beyond this.

First, this is an educational resource designed specifically for Church of Christ congregations. The commentary developed within the study guide is specific to the tradition and commitments of the Stone-Campbell Movement. Second, the selection of participants in the intervention and the context of the topics discussed are influenced by

6. Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, 323–24.

7. Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, 326.

particular circumstances that existed during the timeframe of this project. Third, it was revealed that use of the study guide could be limited only to those who have particular training to facilitate a conversation or knowledge of certain concepts. This is an important limitation to note as the study guide assumes people will approach it with the curiosity and maturity necessary to engage with learning and formation within a particular framework of practicing theology. This limitation could be addressed by redrafting the study guide in response to feedback.

Despite these limitations, there are possibilities to consider for application in other contexts. The challenges that face the Stone-Campbell movement regarding matters of theology and practice are not unique to South Australia. The studies that have been developed in the study guide and the framework emerging out of chapter 4 are transferable to other Church of Christ contexts. Churches of Christ associations in other states around Australia can readily transfer and apply concepts and themes because of a similar structure. The methodology for constructing a framework for practicing theology within a Church of Christ context is also important to note. Gathering a diverse group of people to consider theological themes and shape a response is how Churches of Christ attend to the task of theological interpretation. Without creeds or statements of belief, this is an effective way for leaders of congregations to engage a process that has rigor. There are potential implications for the Stone-Campbell Movement beyond Australia because themes in the study guide have historical continuity and resonate with current practices in congregations around the world. This study guide can be applied outside Australia; however, cultural nuances will need to be considered regarding its application.

Regarding applicability outside Churches of Christ, I am considering the broader Christian church. While the intention of stating a Trinitarian theology is broadly ecumenical, the studies themselves were designed with Church of Christ congregations in mind. Engagement with the study guide would require a certain level of flexibility and autonomy to explore theological themes. However, the framework for practicing theology has broad applicability as a model for bringing our thinking about God into an action and reflection model.

Credibility

The credibility (or internal validity) of this project also needs to be considered when evaluating its trustworthiness. “Internal validity is related to the degree of confidence that others can have in the findings of a particular project.”⁸ To establish credibility for this project, I used multiple methods research to gather and triangulate data. This approach to qualitative research strengthens the internal validity of the project. This is important because the subjectivity of my own voice set the agenda for the project; the research methods I implemented ensured that I tested my own conclusions against others’.

Working with the research and development team offered reflexive confirmation throughout the intervention because the discussions were informed by my own voice. Each session enabled members of the group to ask questions, disagree with my assertions, affirm the trajectory of my thinking, and develop their own line of inquiry. This resulted in an artifact being developed as a result of their work. The triangulation of the data collected through field notes, which included my own reflections added to the

8. Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, 329.

comprehensive notes taken by the field notetaker, evaluations from the development team, and evaluations from outside observers provided comprehensive insight into this project, strengthening its credibility. I used these data to develop a thick description that articulated the themes and subthemes emerging from the data.

Credibility for this project was strengthened by inviting ministers from around South Australia to respond to the identified problem. Receiving evaluations from seven ministers and seventeen members of congregations around the state increased the diversity of input to the project. Through the evaluation process, strengths and weaknesses of the artifact were analyzed. Further conversations about the outcome of the project were recorded in session 8 when time was given for the team to share their final comments after completing the evaluation.

Reflexivity

As the participant researcher in this project, reflexivity is an important aspect of establishing trustworthiness. My personal investment in this project and level of involvement influences the research. Now, I will need to “explore the relationship between [my own] identity and the project.”⁹ This is important because I am not an objective observer, and I have been deeply embedded in this context for many years.

My full-time ministry position is in a state leadership role that oversees ministry training and missional innovation for congregations. I have served in this position for nine years, following fifteen years of congregation ministry with Churches of Christ. During this time, I have observed and been directly involved with the struggles an organized association of forty-three non-creedal congregations face when trying to name

9. Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, 334.

the essentials of faith and practice. These have often been unhelpful experiences for me and for others, so I have been invested in seeking a better way to enter into theological dialogue. My ministry is also invested in seeking effective ways for congregations to be revitalized through missional innovation. My leadership role in the association and my personal experiences have deeply influenced my investment in an outcome for this project.

When I reflect over the field notes, I notice I was more involved in the conversation than I had intended. Originally, I thought I would be a facilitator of the feedback from break out conversations, but I was also a participant, interacting with the thoughts presented by the team. I had implemented a strategy to guard against my own voice dominating the agenda and that was to dedicate a full hour out of the two hours we had set aside for each session of the intervention for the group to break up into smaller groups to discuss their own thoughts and reflections on the material that was presented. I also ensured there was time at the beginning of each session for participants to ask questions and offer suggestions. This ensured each session was informed by other voices in the group and everyone had an opportunity to speak.

As I read through my reflexive comments in the field notes, I noticed that I had intentionally held back in some sessions and allowed for conversations to develop without my input. This also allowed me to observe dynamics and see how the cohesion of the group evolved as they built trust and spoke more openly about what they thought was important. The papers I wrote to prime conversation for each session have built-in agendas for desired outcomes. The field notes reveal my surprise at some of the outcomes of the sessions. At times the development team decided to shape the artifact in a

particular way that meant the practices and titles of studies were not what I had anticipated.

As we progressed towards the end of the intervention, the development team had their own investment in the outcome of the project. Sometimes I would receive an email or a phone call from a participant who had a concern or suggestion that developed outside of our session times. This was usually related to curriculum design or how a theological matter was presented. I was able to bring these conversations to the team at the next session for further discussion. The benefit of doing this was that the conversation was not only influenced by my voice but incorporated into the group discussion for further input. This ensured that any outcome was not about me and what I wanted but about what the team wanted reflected in the artifact.

Due to my role as the primary researcher, I took the lead in developing a draft of each study in the Google Document that was shared with the team. No matter how accurately I wanted to represent the voice of the team, the construction of the artifact was led by my own interpretations of the session and my own bias for desired outcomes. The way to overcome this was for all of my work to be transparent to the team through the Google Document. Their reflections and input were invited between each session, and I incorporated their suggestions as we progressed. I produced the final draft of the artifact, but it was not finalized until each member of the team had the opportunity to approve the content.

While I brought my own agendas to the intervention and had my own thoughts about the outcomes that might be produced, the involvement of the team at every stage kept my bias in check. I enjoyed participating in the team, and I am grateful for when

they spoke up, disagreed with me, and proposed other trajectories for the project. I tried to remain faithful to the desired outcomes of the team as much as possible.

Significance and Implications

Sustainability

During the process of constructing the artifact, I continued to be reminded of the application, value, and sustainability of this project beyond the intervention. For this project to be sustainable, it will need to be integrated into my ministry context.¹⁰ One of the most significant challenges is that I do not have direct leadership responsibility over any of the congregations I hope this project will affect. The autonomous nature of each congregation within the association means I will need to make the proposition of integrating this framework attractive and easily accessible. The use of ministers from congregations in the intervention and members of congregations as outside evaluators has already increased interest in the project. Ministers who participated in the intervention have articulated the benefits they felt personally and have indicated their desire to integrate the project outcomes into the life of their congregation. Some of the outside evaluators also commented that they were looking forward to completing the study with others in their congregation.

One of the first tasks for sustainability is to review the artifact in light of the evaluation. Some adjustments will need to be made so the framework is clear and the content of the studies is accessible for the intended audience. This will involve developing a leaders' guide and a participants' guide. I will also record video content to be accessed through the QR codes attached to each study. The next task will be to

10. Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, 337.

produce the artifact as a resource for congregations offered by the Churches of Christ state office. I and a staff member on my team will work in our professional roles with ministers and leadership teams to educate churches about the study guide and its intended benefits.

Feedback in the questionnaires from inside and outside evaluations stated it will be good to access a resource produced in South Australia. This bears significance for local congregations because most resources they access are from outside Australia. To have a practical theological framework that integrates education about the foundations of Churches of Christ produced locally increases the likelihood of sustainability in this context and potentially around Australia. Another aspect of this project's sustainability is the timing of the project intervention in conjunction with a review of Churches of Christ in South Australia. The outcomes of this project have been integrated with a strategic priority of the organization, so there are resources available to promote and integrate the project's outcomes. This includes public presentation of the artifact at state leadership gatherings and opportunities to facilitate workshops and seminars about the project and how to integrate it into the life of a congregation. The studies represent principles and practices that are already embedded in the life of Church of Christ congregations, so the outcome of the intervention is likely to enhance rather than disrupt congregational life.

Personal Significance

I entered into this project with a deep desire to discover how theologically diverse leaders of Churches of Christ congregations really were. I have articulated my observation of tension, suspicion, and identity drift. Part of me was apprehensive about bringing a diverse group of ministers together to have deep and informed theological

conversations that would produce a meaningful resource for congregations. My experience of conversations with the research and development team was encouraging and increased my confidence in the capacity of leaders to have meaningful theological dialogue. I felt as if my relationships with each member of the group grew as we built deeper trust and respect for one another.

My assumptions about mission were confirmed, but I was left concerned that there is still a lot of work ahead to educate people about the nature of mission and how it can revitalize congregations. I have a particular investment in this part of the outcome because my role is to help congregations with missional innovation. I believe there is more work to be attended to here. One of the insider evaluations suggested there needs to be a separate study guide as a “prequel” to the one we produced to educate people about mission. At first, I was disheartened by this suggestion, but now I am grateful as this has offered me some guidance on possible future work.

I am encouraged that there was enthusiasm from the participants in the intervention and the outside observers about the project. It revealed to me a need for the intervention and people’s investment in the outcome. This will assist me to continue to serve Churches of Christ congregations in meaningful ways.

Ecclesial Significance

Churches of Christ in South Australia has a vision to be a “dynamic, relevant and vital Christian movement, thriving on the implementation of New Testament Christianity in ways that make sense to contemporary Australians.”¹¹ In chapter 2, I suggested the

11. “Vision and Mission Statement: Churches of Christ in South Australia and Northern Territory,” <https://www.churchesofchrist-sa.org.au/d/5I2d83UgQS9QAZQvVDCe4zyw3>.

vision statement is aspirational; however, I believe the findings of this project bear significance in that they could contribute to the realization of this aspiration.

I believe the ecclesial significance of this project is strengthened by the participation of ministers and congregants in the intervention and evaluation. Ernest Stringer suggests that this type of action research “build[s] a supportive network of collaborative relationships that provides [participants] with an ongoing resource.”¹² Participants in this project have been equipped with new skills to address the problem of a lack of a theological framework and missional vitality. Building collaborative relationships throughout the intervention has been seminal to the vitality of the movement.

The theological rationale for this project has affirmed the historical continuity of the Stone-Campbell Movement for contemporary Churches of Christ congregations. The outcome of this project invites congregations to consider how to be dynamic and relevant by bringing experiences of Christian faith, historical foundations of Churches of Christ, Scripture, and context into dialogue with the agency of God. My hope is that congregations will be open to the possibilities of how a dynamic theological framework can continue to inform their missional nature.

Based on my experiences of participants in this project, there is a curiosity and desire to explore new ways of engaging theological dialogue within the framework of Churches of Christ identity. Participants were energized by the potential for the artifact to move congregations into a practice of enacting theological theories and being transformed by these experiences. If Churches of Christ were to implement this

12. Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, 352.

framework, outcomes could include greater vitality of responses to God's mission, unity among Christians as a missional outcome, and confidence in articulating theology within a diversity of ecclesial expressions.

Theological Significance

This project provides some theological framing around principles that are deemed central to the identity of Churches of Christ. At a deeper level, I believe this project tested the theory of God's dynamic agency throughout the intervention. Through my contextual listening, I discerned hesitancy among Churches of Christ leaders to enter into dialogue about theological matters due to negative experiences in the past and suspicion about the implications of diverse opinions. During the intervention, the group expressed their enjoyment about being part of the conversation and discovered resonance on many theological matters while accommodating diverse opinions on other matters. I believe an active movement of God's Spirit was working with the group as I observed attentive listening, a willingness to learn from one another, freedom to disagree, and a spirit of unity in the group. The ability of the group to develop six studies that help participants learn about the core beliefs of Churches of Christ and put a theological framework into practice to stimulate mission is a remarkable testament to the participants' willingness to be guided by the agency of God.

The use of Scripture to inform theology was a primary hermeneutical source of making sense of Christian faith and experience for the group. However, it was stated that we bring our experiences to Scripture. While affirming various hermeneutical sources that help shape theological meaning, the development team was eager to draw attention to the agency of God informing our engagement with Scripture.

A significant theological implication for this project is a clearer articulation of the nature of God. In chapter 2, I built on Alexander Campbell's doctrine of God and epistemological methods of discerning the revelation of God in context. Bringing the broader Christian tradition into conversation with this doctrine of God, I proposed a Trinitarian theology as the foundation for the project. I articulated this Trinitarian theology further in the context of how God's mission informs the church by introducing *perichoresis*. This offered theological language for the research and development team to talk about the dynamic nature of God in relationship with the church. Within the context of Churches of Christ, *perichoresis* informs a view of the historical continuity of the movement's identity and practice as dynamic. This was affirmed by the development team in the first session of the intervention when people thanked me for articulating my theology. There was a sense of relief but also permission for others to articulate their theology. What I learned from this experience is that when a framework and a process is offered and there is a willingness to engage through a posture of listening and learning, theological dialogue can meaningfully shape communities of faith.

Final Considerations

This project was limited by a number of factors from the beginning. First, I delimited the project to Churches of Christ in the South Australian context. Limitations for this project were imposed by this context. This included the demographics of congregations and their leaders. The ethnicity of participants was White Euro-Western; they were predominantly male and over the age of forty (with the exception of one participant in their thirties). I am curious to explore how people under the age of thirty would engage with the project and how different the outcome would be. I am also

interested to explore this project within a multi-ethnic context or another ethnic-specific cultural context. I am aware that this project has been limited by the voices that have contributed to it, so I would like to consider expanding the scope of this project for Churches of Christ congregations in other contexts.

A matter raised in the evaluation about an understanding of mission needs to be stated for further consideration. The comment about the missional imagination of congregations being anemic due to a lack of theological reflection has stayed with me. I have also been considering the suggestion raised by one of the respondents in a questionnaire to create an educational resource specifically oriented around developing an understanding of God's mission and desired outcomes. While it was my intention to build this into the artifact, there remain questions about the missional readiness of congregations and a general understanding of mission. My interpretation of some of the feedback is that members of congregations are stuck within a Christendom mindset about what mission is. Attending to this issue requires more than the development of a missional theology but a reorientation of how we understand the church in relationship to God's mission in a post-Christendom context.

Concluding Remarks

Churches of Christ in South Australia has great potential to be the association of congregations proposed in the mission and vision statement: dynamic, relevant, and vital. Through this project, I hope to provide some framing for the association that ensures theology is dynamic, has historical continuity with the original proposals of the Stone-Campbell Movement, and has contemporary relevance that is faithful to hermeneutical sources of theology. The goal of this framework is to move beyond the distractions of

disagreement on theological definitions and to be a collaborative network of congregations united by God's mission in the world. The framework is designed to invite people to practice theology in ways that draw attention to the agency of God, who revitalizes and transforms the church of Christ. If congregations use the study guide and implement it with a commitment to learn from one another and participate in the life of God's mission, possibility for Churches of Christ to be a dynamic and thriving movement will increase. The numerical decline of congregations paints a bleak future. However, there are possibilities to be a revitalized movement of Christian churches, but it will not be through the clever innovation of human agency. Stated simply, "We can't fix ourselves. But here is the good news: God can."¹³

13. Reese, *At the Blue Hole*, 40.

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APPENDIX A

IRB Expedited Review Approval Letter

ABILENE CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY

Educating Students for Christian Service and Leadership Throughout the World

Office of Research and Sponsored Programs
320 Hardin Administration Building, ACU Box 29103, Abilene, Texas 79699-9103
325-674-2885



Dear Mark,

On behalf of the Institutional Review Board, I am pleased to inform you that your project titled

was approved by expedited review (Category 7) on 9/23/2021 (IRB # 21-099). Upon completion of this study, please submit the Inactivation Request Form within 30 days of study completion.

If you wish to make any changes to this study, including but not limited to changes in study personnel, number of participants recruited, changes to the consent form or process, and/or changes in overall methodology, please complete the Study Amendment Request Form.

If any problems develop with the study, including any unanticipated events that may change the risk profile of your study or if there were any unapproved changes in your protocol, please inform the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs and the IRB promptly using the Unanticipated Events/Noncompliance Form.

I wish you well with your work.

Sincerely,

Megan Roth

Megan Roth, Ph.D.
Director of Research and Sponsored Programs

APPENDIX B

Human Research Ethics Committee Approval Letter

Date approved: 10/18/2021

Approval #21/379

Response to Mark Riessen.

As a low-risk project, on behalf of the Christian Research Association, I give ethical approval to the project, *Constructing a Theological Framework that Revitalizes the Missional Nature of Churches of Christ in South Australia*.

I do recommend that if the Christian Research Association is giving ethical approval to the project, it is appropriate to also give the CRA as a reference on Information Sheet for ethical questions in addition to the reference to Megan Roth at Abilene University. It is unlikely that someone at Abilene University would know the details of the ethics practices of Australia and it is inappropriate to only have an overseas contact for such matters. Thus, I recommend the addition of the sentence: 'This project has been given ethical approval by the Christian Research Association Human Research Ethics Committee. If you have any questions about the ethics, you may contact secretary_HREC@cra.org.au.'

The other matter is not one I would wish to make a definitive judgement, but I do invite the researcher to reconsider. Participants are being asked to attend eleven 2 hour meetings at a centralised location. Overall, the demand may be something like a full week of work from each participant (including travel time and preparation time). This is a major imposition on participants and it is not clear that the benefits will justify the time. This has been spelt out in the introductory materials and thus potential participants can weigh up whether they are willing to make this commitment. I do understand that this is action research and not just the collection of data. There are several concerns related to this request:

1. The researcher may well find few people willing or able to make such a commitment of time and thus the project may collapse before it starts.
2. The research may find that a high proportion of people drop out of the process over time and fail to complete it, which may have adverse consequences for the aim of the project.

While the researcher is free to make his own decision about the time required of participants, I recommend that he consider reducing that time considerably.

If the researcher does decide to reduce the time commitment required of participants, I would appreciate if the CRA Ethics Committee could be informed. However, a revised ethics application is not required, and the researcher is not required to reduce the time commitment if he feels that it is needed for the purpose of the research.

The CRA Ethics Committee wishes the researcher well in this project.

Philip Hughes

Executive Officer, Christian Research Association Human Research Ethics Committee.

APPENDIX C

Solicitation Email

Dear church leader,

I am currently undertaking a Doctor of Ministry program with Abilene Christian University which involves a research project. The problem I have identified for exploration is a lack of clear theological principles that set foundations for missional vitality within Churches of Christ in South Australia. This project is being supervised by Dr. Carson Reed, Director of the DMin program at ACU.

In order to address the problem, I am recruiting a research and development team. I am specifically inviting you to consider being part of the team because I think you will bring great value to this project. I am looking for Churches of Christ leaders who have experience in ministry with Churches of Christ and/or Conference working groups or committees. Participants will be selected from around Churches of Christ in South Australia to broaden the conversation across diverse theological perspectives. I am looking for a balance of men and women across a broad age range. I have used the Churches of Christ SA & NT Conference directory to obtain your contact details to issue this invitation.

The purpose of the team is to create a study guide that addresses the problem. As the primary investigator, I will facilitate the research and development team, and the process for developing the study guide.

The research and development team will be made up of 8-10 leaders. The initiation of this group will commence in February 2022 at a date and time to be determined in consultation with the group. The group will meet eight (8) times fortnightly for approximately 2 hours at each meeting. For sessions 2-7 each participant will be required to do at least one hour of reading to prepare for the meeting. Between meetings 7 and 8 each participant will be asked to distribute a questionnaire to at least three (3) people from their congregation. Each participant will complete a questionnaire in the final meeting which will take approximately 20 minutes. The final meeting will conclude by late May 2022.

Further information about this project can be obtained from the consent form. This also includes contact information for my supervisor, the Chair of the Christian Research Association (CRA), and the Chair of the Internal Review Board (IRB) should you wish to discuss this project further or at any stage need to raise a concern or make a complaint about the ethics of the project.

I ask that you prayerfully consider your participation in this group. To accept this invitation please email me and I will send the consent form for you to consider the project further. The consent form will outline the purpose of the project, what level of participation is being asked of you, risks and benefits of participating in this study, privacy and confidentiality procedures and contact information if you have any questions about the project.

Accepting this invitation is not an agreement to participate in the study. It is an expression of interest to explore this opportunity further.

It is my prayer and hope that the team I bring together for this project will have a deep and lasting positive impact on how Churches of Christ congregations understand what it means to be part of this movement. My hope is that our work will provide a helpful theological framework that stimulates active participation in God's mission across our churches.

Thank you for your consideration.

Regards

Mark Riessen
Doctor of Ministry candidate,
Abilene Christian University

APPENDIX D

Consent Form

Introduction: Constructing a Theological Framework that Revitalizes the Missional Nature of Churches of Christ in South Australia

Thank you for your interest in participating in this research project I am facilitating as part of my Doctor of Ministry. This form describes the project and what is being asked of you. Please read carefully and let me know if you have any questions or concerns. Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary. You may refuse to participate or stop your participation at any time.

What is the purpose of this research project and why am I doing it?

The purpose of this research is to address an identified problem with the lack of clear theological principles that set foundations for missional vitality by developing a study guide for Churches of Christ in South Australia.

The research will be conducted with a small group of participants who will help construct the study guide. This will be done through a focus group in which we will identify common themes for developing a study guide. This study guide can be used to educate churches that are part of the association of Churches of Christ in South Australia and address the problem identified.

What is being asked of you?

If you choose to participate in this research, you will be asked to attend 8 meetings as part of a research and development team. These meetings will be held fortnightly at the Churches of Christ State Office from February to May in 2022. Each meeting is expected to take 2-hours. During the course of these meetings you will be asked to participate in the following procedures:

- Attendance at each meeting
- Reading a discussion paper in preparation for meetings 2-7
- Smaller breakout group discussions during the meetings where you will take notes of your discussion to share with the broader group
- Facilitate surveys with two or three outside observers for evaluation. Once a draft of the study guide is developed, you will be asked to identify some people in your congregation who will read it. You will email the study guide and a questionnaire to each person who accepts this invitation. There will be instruction on the questionnaire for them to email it back to me.

- Complete a survey after the final meeting for the purpose of reviewing the study guide.

There will be an independent field notetaker in attendance at each meeting recording conversations and observations of your participation during each meeting.

Risks and benefits associated with participating in this research include:

The only identifiable risk in participating with this research is the potential for a breach of confidentiality by participants in the focus group.

There are potential benefits to participating in this study. While there will be no financial compensation for participating in this research, you will have the opportunity to gain deeper insights into the theological identity of Churches of Christ in South Australia.

There is a possibility of building meaningful relationships with fellow participants and outside observers in the process. In addition, you will be contributing to constructing a meaningful dialogue for the movement in response to the identified problem.

Privacy & Confidentiality

Any information you provide will be confidential to the extent allowable by law. Some identifiable data may have to be shared with individuals outside of the study team, such as members of the ACU Institutional Review Board. Otherwise, your confidentiality will be protected.

The notetaker will record notes on the primary investigators laptop and data will be saved to an external hard drive which will be kept in a locked cabinet in the primary investigators locked office. This will be the only digital record of data collection and it will be kept offline. During the data analysis, information will be de-identified.

You are asked to respect the confidentiality of the group. Information may be shared within the context of meetings that is personal and sensitive. By signing this consent form you agree to maintain confidentiality and not to share information produced by the group unless directed by a consensus of the group.

Understandably, the dynamic of group work may limit participants voluntarily sharing information. At any time, if you do not feel comfortable participating in the conversation or sharing information with the group, you may take a break or discontinue participation with the group at any time.

Surveys distributed to the participants and outside observers will be in email form.

Though surveys will not require names to be given and the survey itself can be anonymous, surveys will be returned to the primary investigator via email.

Who to contact if you have any questions?

If you have questions about the research study, the lead researcher, Mark Riessen may be contacted at 0422115259 or mriessen@churchesofchrist-sa.org.au.

This project has been given ethical approval by the Christian Research Association (CRA) Human Research Ethics Committee. If you have any questions about the ethics of this project, you may contact the Chair of the CRA and Executive Officer, Philip Hughes at secretary_HREC@cra.org.au.

Dr. Carson Reed is the primary advisor for this project. The most effective way to contact Dr. Reed is via email at cer12a@acu.edu.

This project is also approved by the Internal Review Board (IRB) at Abilene Christian University.

If you have concerns about this study, believe you may have been injured because of this study, or have general questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact ACU's Chair of the Institutional Review Board and Executive Director of Research, Megan Roth, Ph.D. Dr. Roth may be reached at (325) 674-2885

megan.roth@acu.edu

328 Hardin Administration Bldg, ACU Box 29103
Abilene, TX 79699

Consent Signature Section

Please sign this form if you voluntarily agree to participate in this study. Sign only after you have read all of the information provided and your questions have been answered to your satisfaction. You should receive a copy of this signed consent form. You do not waive any legal rights by signing this form.

Printed Name of Participant

Signature of Participant

Date

Printed Name of Researcher

Signature of Researcher

Date

APPENDIX E

Field Note Protocol

1. For each meeting record the date and time at the top of the page.
2. Notes will be recorded in a 3-column format. The notetaker will record observations and impressions in the left and middle column. The Primary Investigator will record observations and interpretations in the right column as soon as possible after each meeting.
3. At the beginning of each meeting, record who was present and the arrangement of where people sat and who they sat next to. Make note of the comfort with which participants appear to be at ease in casual conversation (or not) prior to each meeting commencing. Are there participants who do not engage in conversation prior to the meeting? Throughout the meeting note any observations of who speaks often and who hardly speaks.
4. It is not expected that every word will be captured verbatim. Record only what the participants are contributing to the conversation. Note the name of the person speaking and capture the main idea of what they are communicating. Quote if necessary. Include observations about the tone of speech, body language and non-verbal communication that may be relevant.
5. At the end of each meeting hand the field notes to the Primary Investigator.

Date & Time

Field notes-observations	Notetakers impressions	PI's additions and initial interpretations

APPENDIX F

Focus Group Protocol

For the purpose of this study, the Research and Development Team is a Focus Group. The following protocol will assist members of the group to participate.

1. The focus group will meet fortnightly for 8 consecutive meetings in the first half of 2022. Participants are expected to attend each meeting and arrive 10 minutes prior to the agreed commencement time.
2. Any material produced for discussion at each meeting needs to have been read by each participant prior to the meeting.
3. Please respect the confidentiality of the group. There may be things discussed within the context of the group where people feel they can be honest and vulnerable. It is important to remember that there is context for this conversation. To respect the conversation and the people involved you are asked not to discuss the contents of what is shared with anyone outside the group.
4. Respect for the opinions of others. It is likely that in a group, participants have differing opinions. You are invited to have a posture of listening to others' thoughts and opinions, respecting that they have something to contribute to the conversation. Please refrain from interrupting others, criticisms of others' opinions, disrespectful comments, or talking over the top of people.
5. Please to contribute to the group discussion. All contributions are helpful and your opinion is welcome. If there is something presented in the pre-meeting material you don't understand, please ask for clarification so you feel more equipped to contribute.
6. If at any time you feel you can no longer commit to being part of the group, please discuss with the primary researcher. You are able to cease your involvement at any time.

APPENDIX G

Research and Development Team Questionnaire

1. Is there anything you think has been omitted or left out of the discussions that needed to be included?
2. Did you feel comfortable discussing the theology and practice of Churches of Christ in South Australia? Why/why not?
3. What is the most important thing you learned/experienced from participating in this group that you would like people in your church to know?
4. Can you identify any specific strengths of weaknesses in the use of this study guide if distributed to churches?
5. Do you think the study guide that has been developed will be a useful resource for Churches of Christ in South Australia? Why/why not?
6. What do you think will be the most effective use of this study guide? What impact do you think it will have if people engaged with it?

APPENDIX H

Outside Observer Questionnaire

1. After reading the study guide what are your initial thoughts?
2. Do you think this study guide would be a helpful resource for constructing a theological framework for Churches of Christ in South Australia?
3. How do you think this study guide might revitalize the missional nature of Churches of Christ in South Australia?
4. Can you identify any specific strengths of weaknesses in the use of this study guide if distributed to churches?
5. Is there anything you think has been omitted or left out of this study guide?
6. Do you have any further observations or questions about this resource or the process implemented to develop it?

APPENDIX I

Session Handouts

Session 1:

Introduction:

- Comment on context analysis and determining the problem.
- Why this research team?

The proposal stated above is the working title of a thesis that seeks to address a problem. This problem has been identified in two parts. First, the breadth of theological expression within Churches of Christ has become more of a distraction for the movement rather than a discipline we attend to. Second, the landscape for how Churches of Christ expresses its call to serve God's mission has dramatically changed from the days when we once celebrated rapid growth and meaningful engagement in community life. My proposal is that Churches of Christ need to re-engage the work of careful theological reflection and re-orientation around core theological principles. This work will revitalize the missional nature of the movement through practices grounded in some fundamental theological principles.

- Questions and clarification to explore the purpose of this project further with its potential implications.
- **Consent forms**
- I will also facilitate a conversation on what the group hopes to achieve through this intervention. **What are your hopes and hesitations?**

Mapping the conceptual framework:

Historical survey

Historical records indicate Churches of Christ in South Australia enjoyed great success during a time when churches were united in cooperative evangelistic purpose and had clearly stated theological proposals that focused their missional objectives. Today, the vision and mission statement of the movement is barely known and churches have

developed a much stronger sense of autonomy. This autonomy gives way to congregations no longer engaging with the story of the movement.

Key figure and co-founder of the Stone-Campbell Movement (Churches of Christ in Australia), Alexander Campbell, was the most influential leader for the development of the movement in South Australia. Campbell's thinking and theological commitments shaped the ecclesiology and practices reflected in our churches today.

I am proposing that there are certain aspects of Campbell's theological and epistemological method that can inform Churches of Christ for missional revitalization today. The core of my theological method is to recapture a trinitarian theology that assists with ecumenical cooperation and a theology of mission. While trinitarianism was a term rejected by Campbell (it wasn't a biblical term and Campbell also avoided any kind of 'ism' that might lead to sectarianism), Campbell's doctrine of God was clear, "In our Christian religion we have a 'divine nature', and we have three persons – FATHER, the WORD and the HOLY SPIRIT."¹

Trinitarian mission

In the past few decades there has been a resurgence of scholarship in trinitarian theology and how this informs the mission of the church. Powell, Hicks and McKenzie propose that trinitarian theology is central to the Christian faith and they present it as the first of six theological commitments Churches of Christ need to reconsider.² Mark Powell suggests that the Stone-Campbell tradition needs to invest in a canonical theism that is trinitarian. Not only is there widespread agreement in the broad Christian tradition, but this can assist the movement with focus and ecumenical engagement.³

A way of framing this theological proposal for mission is a re-examination of the term *'perichoresis'* to describe the nature of God in the Triune inter-relationship who invites us to participate in the *missio Dei*. This language seeks to avoid abstractions which can become problematic.

1. Campbell, *Millennial Harbinger, III*," 393.

2. Powell, Hicks, and McKinzie, *Discipleship in Community*, 15–20.

3. Powell, "Canonical Theism and Theological Commitments in The Stone-Campbell Movement," 232.

*“It is not the church that has a mission of salvation to fulfil in the world; it is the mission of the Son and the Spirit through the Father that includes the church, creating a church as it goes on its way.”*⁴ –

Jürgen Moltmann

Perichoresis is the mutual interdependence of the three persons of the Godhead, of the same substance yet each unique and distinct expressions of the Triune God.⁵ The term is used to describe the interdependent relationality of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit as the divine nature of the trinity and each unique expression within it. It also describes the relationship of the Triune God to the world expressed through the *missio Dei*. The mission of God is engaged through the embrace of the other as reflected in the self-sacrificing, self-giving love of the Triune God – *perichoresis*.⁶

My argument is that a doctrine of God that reflects God’s dynamic activity in the plurality and relationality of the trinity is what invites and transforms the church for mission in the world today. The dynamic of mutual interdependence is what needs to be reflected in the movement of Churches of Christ through its ordinances and missional practice.

A proposed outcome

The proposed work of this focus group is to develop a study guide that will help inform Churches of Christ congregations in South Australia, biblically, theologically and missionally. This can be a study undertaken by leadership teams or small groups. I am proposing a trinitarian canonical theism as a theological thread to inform our study. This is not to impose a theological framework, but to invite the reader to explore and consider the proposal as it invites them to respond to each theme presented in the study.

My hope is that the study guide will include six (6) studies with each including: a historical rationale as to why this is important for Churches of Christ, an invitation to

4. Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*, 64.

5. Twombly, *Perichoresis and Personhood*.

6. Franke, *Missional Theology*, 16.

explore the theme, a bible study for the theme, some questions for the reader to explore, and a missional practice they can integrate as their response.

Proposed themes for exploration:

Session 2	Why Scripture is vital
Session 3	How diversity within our unity is missional
Session 4	Why interdependence is the way a movement works
Session 5	The Lord’s Supper and being sent ones
Session 6	Baptism as an act of surrender and obedience
Session 7	The community of believers and mutuality in ministry

How will the topic be introduced? What format should the study guide take? How will each topic be presented for discussion and exploration so that it is an effective educational resource?

What is important to communicate about each topic?

What Scripture will help guide the particular theme?

Why is this theme important for shaping theological perspectives within the movement?

Is there a historical narrative that needs to be included with each topic?

How will essential continuity bear relevance to Churches of Christ today?

How will this topic impact the missional nature of a church?

What sorts of discussion questions should be included in the study guide for each topic?

What sorts of missional practices should be included to help people put their discussion into action?

The final meeting

Our final meeting is session 8. Here, we will evaluate the study guide.

Additional note on missional practice

What is a missional practice? My observation of missional practice in our current context appears to be highly programmatic and driven by agendas that are often filtered through a modernistic ‘can do’ attitude. That is, we rely heavily on our own ability to achieve outcomes and we’ll ask God to bless our work rather than seeking to discern and join in with God’s activity in the world. Emphasis in western culture is on human agency. Missional practice is about being led by the dynamic activity of God.

Here is my own definition. A missional practice is a discipline someone can integrate into their life of discipleship that helps them participate more fully in the mission of God by first seeking to discern God’s agency. I also refer to missional practice as a form of spiritual practice. The mission of God transforms the participant as much as the world the participant inhabits. Missional practices are habitual and form *habitus*, a way of being. They draw us deeper into God and develop deeper awareness of the other. Missional practices are transformative and invite others into transformational experiences. They can be personal and communal. The practice itself doesn’t necessarily change the world around you, you are changed by the practice and participate in the world in new ways. *Lectio divina*, celebrating the Eucharist, and acts of hospitality in community are all different ways of participating in missional practice. It requires a discipline of action and reflection in order for *habitus* to develop. Missional practice then is reflexive praxis.

Session 2:

Why Scripture is vital

“We are assured that more depends on the perspicuous and correct translation of the New Testament, for the illumination of the Christian community, and for the conversion of the world, than upon any other means in human power.”⁷ – Alexander Campbell

“Like his father, he [Alexander Campbell] was convinced that when freed from the shackles of the human creeds and confessions, anyone could read, understand, and follow the teachings of the New Testament.”⁸

Alexander Campbell’s commitment to Scripture was heavily influenced by 17th and 18th century English philosophers. Applying common sense and reason to Scripture is how one sought the revelation of God. In Campbell’s experience, the Holy Spirit is revealed to us through Scripture. Campbell took Scripture very seriously, so much so that he wrote his own interpretation of the New Testament. His core agenda was Christian unity. He believed that if everyone had access to the correct interpretation of Scripture and applied themselves to the discipline of reading it, Christians would be led by the Spirit to similar conclusions. The ultimate agenda for Campbell was the unity of Christians.

Of course, this is idealistic and we understand that Christians today use many hermeneutical lenses to interpret Scripture. This is not a bad thing. Culture, context, experience, theological method, all inform our approaches to Scripture and we often arrive at different conclusions. However, the principle for Alexander Campbell was that every Christian ought to commit to the discipline of reading Scripture. It’s how God is revealed (through Scripture not the creeds).

7. Foster, *A Life of Alexander Campbell*, 91. Foster quotes Alexander Campbell from “*Historical Sketch of the Origen and Progress of the New Testament*,” *Millennial Harbinger*, June 1832, 271.

8. Foster, *A Life of Alexander Campbell*, 91.

Today we run into a number of challenges with this discipline. First, there is an ever-growing biblical illiteracy within our churches. Often Christians are not in the habit of reading Scripture, in fact Scripture is often weaponized which leads to our second challenge. Christians often cherry pick Scripture verses out of context, only read the passages they like or that affirm bias, or use Scripture to peddle a social agenda. These abuses of Scripture are what Campbell tried desperately to avoid. Childers, Foster and Reece refer to this as a patternistic hermeneutic.⁹ It's a way of reading Scripture built on a tradition or a bias.

At the heart of Churches of Christ is a commitment to be informed first by Scripture over any tradition, creed or social agenda. I would argue that part of the problem is that we read Scripture rather than allowing Scripture to read us. The discipline of reading Scripture is a way of surrendering to the Spirit of God allowing the mystery of God and our own intelligence to be in dialogue with each other so that God might be revealed.

- In what ways can we encourage the reading of Scripture as a way of being God's people?
- How can the nature of God be discovered in Scripture? Does it reveal to us, God, conceptualized as the interdependent, three unique persons of the same substance in equal relationship to each other?
- How do we hold mystery and reason in tension as we attend to Scripture?
- How does the discipline of reading Scripture inform our participation in God's mission?
- How might this practice transform Churches of Christ in South Australia?
- What is a missional practice associated with reading Scripture?

9. Childers, Foster, and Reese, *The Crux of the Matter*, 143.

Session 3:

How diversity within our unity is missional

"If we oppose the union of believers, we oppose directly the will of God, the prayer of Jesus, the spirit of piety, and the salvation of the world." – Barton Stone

"The church of Christ on earth is essentially, intentionally and, constitutionally one." – Thomas Campbell, Declaration & Address 1809

Alexander Campbell was absolutely committed to his father's proposals in the Declaration and Address, for the unity of all Christians. For him it was a visible testimony to the world of the revelation of God through God's church, that people would bear with one another in love and find a common identity in the confession that Jesus Christ is Lord. Foster says that Alexander made the basis for unity broad and inclusive and that differences of opinion were not relevant to this quest. However, biblical instruction was not an opinion and the basis of union was in the restoration of New Testament principles and practices.¹⁰

The union of Christians wasn't about forming another denomination, it was about breaking down denominational boundaries so that Christians of all traditions who confessed Jesus as Lord could fellowship together around the Lord's Table. This quest was, however, constantly hampered by differences of theological opinions and practice. Even though the vision was to move away from sectarianism, sectarian behavior was never far away.

The 'who's in and who's out' rhetoric was not a productive line of enquiry for the unity movement so it always accommodated the broad diversity of Christians and still does. We are not a diverse people who try to be united, we are a united people in Christ who are diverse. There is diversity of expression and opinion, yet we center our

10. Foster, *A Life of Alexander Campbell*, 84.

belonging around our inclusiveness in Christ which is an action of God's love and grace towards us. Unity is a result of God's activity not our own.

In South Australia, the unity movement has taken form in different ways. During the 20th century there appeared to be a strong sense of identity within the movement. The strength of the movement was in its ecumenical efforts. Churches of Christ always punched above its weight in representation at ecumenical forums and conversations. This is where the true expression of unity was realized, to 'sink into union with the body of Christ.'¹¹ Stirling says states that our ecumenical efforts reflect exactly what Stone and the Campbells would have hoped for.¹²

There has been an ever-growing ecumenical environment within our Church of Christ congregations in the 21st century. Denominational allegiances are less of a priority to people seeking to be part of a church yet the questions remain, 'what is Churches of Christ on about anyway?' The old expression, 'in the essentials unity, in the non-essentials liberty, in all things love', is rolled out from time to time with an emphasis on our commitment to love. The conversation always comes back to, 'but what are the essentials?' Failed attempts to address this question have been cause for division, mistrust, and misunderstanding. This has caused anxiety over the fragmentation of the Conference of Churches of Christ in South Australia. My proposal is that giving adequate attention to this question would build confidence in the movement and assist with the ultimate missional agenda, that the church might be one so that the world would see our visible unity and God might be glorified. Yet our diverse expression of the body of Christ is an essential element. This means we will hold differences of theological opinions.

There is a missional frame within the plurality of God (not polytheism but trinitarian monotheism). There are unique aspects of God's diversity but also the unity of the Godhead in the mutuality of God's expression of love. This is articulated in John 17:22–23 where the full expression of the plurality of God is given in love so that the disciples might be one as God is one. The vision of the Stone-Campbell movement had a

11. This comes from the impetus and first declaration of the Last Will and Testament of the Springfield Presbytery signed by Barton Stone and his colleagues.

12. Stirling, *Churches of Christ: Interpreting Ourselves for the New Century*, 52.

missional agenda associated with this text. If the world could see the glory of God's image expressed through the unity of a diverse group of believers, then they would believe. The mission is God's and it invites us, the church, to participate in something that is far beyond our own boundaries and agendas.

Stirling reflects that there is diversity within the New Testament church while there was also unity in Christ and that is what ought to be reflected in the church today.¹³ John Franke refers to this as the essential and historical continuity of the church. He suggests that even though there can be broad diversity in the plurality of the church, this reflects the essential continuity of the Christian tradition.¹⁴ Franke also highlights that conformity is not unity and that conformity, in fact, inhibits missional objectives as being too narrow, thus excluding people. Diversity within our vision for unity is essential. It reflects the *imago Dei* and the *missio Dei*, hosting a broad center for the expression of God's church.

My suggestion is that the diversity of God's people within a broad center of unity in Christ is the most helpful missional posture for Churches of Christ in South Australia. It allows for an inclusive and ecumenical dialogue with the other through the mutual reception of, and participation in, God's love.

- Is unity still on the agenda for Churches of Christ? What does this look like today?
- What does the plurality of God within the inter-relationship of the 3-persons tell us about the nature of God and the nature of the church?
- How do you think the original vision for unity helps us participate in God's mission?
- How might this practice transform Churches of Christ in South Australia?
- What is a missional practice associated with being people who express love in all things, appreciate diversity in the non-essentials, and are united in the essentials? What are the essentials?

13. Stirling, *Churches of Christ: Interpreting Ourselves for the New Century*, 53.

14. Franke, *Missional Theology*, 151.

- What does Scripture have to say to us about a vision for a united church?

Session 4:

Interdependence as a reflection of God’s missional nature

*“We can do little or nothing to improve and elevate the Christian ministry without cooperation.”*¹⁵ – Alexander Campbell

*“We rejoice in God, maker of heaven and earth, and in the covenant of love which binds us to God and one another.”*¹⁶ – The Design

Jack Reese says the movement was “born out of a desire to unite, not divide”.¹⁷ Highlighted in the previous paper was the desire and plea for Christian unity which is at the heart of the movement Churches of Christ was born out of. However, there has always been tension in this plea, partly due to the autonomy of congregations from the very beginning described as ‘radical congregationalism’.¹⁸ It was Alexander Campbell who laid the foundation for this in the early years of the movement, based on his criticisms of defective church organizations such as synods and presbyteries that inhibited the freedoms of Christians. About a decade or so later Campbell was publishing essays advocating for church cooperation (organization) due to a number of factors. Most importantly, he considered it wasn’t enough to simply give a Christian a bible, there needed to be instruction and guidance to protect against false teaching. Cooperation also served a greater purpose of supporting evangelistic efforts and by 1849 he became the first President of the movement’s ‘Missionary Society’, an organizational structure he had opposed some twenty years earlier.

In the midst of Campbell’s evolving understanding of congregational cooperation, tension grew between those who dogmatically held to his original position and those who were following Campbell into a new form of church polity. The emergence of

15. Foster, *A Life of Alexander Campbell*, 145. Foster lists Campbell’s ‘Five arguments for Church Organization’ published in the *Millennial Harbinger*, 1842.

16. Cornwell, *Freedom in Covenant*, 62. A confession from the Disciples of Christ – The Design.

17. Reese, *At the Blue Hole*, 179.

18. Foster et al., *Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement*, 125.

Churches of Christ in South Australia was at a time when Campbell was advocating strongly for church cooperation and the Evangelical Union of Churches of Christ in South Australia was born in 1875. Since then, there has always been cooperation among congregations through the formation of many organizations such as Global Mission Partners and CareWorks. The structure the congregations implemented to assist the association of congregations in cooperative mission and ministry efforts is what we now call the 'Conference of Churches of Christ in South Australia'.

In the 21st Century it would appear that the momentum of cooperative efforts has drifted somewhat and each congregation is very much focused in their local context. While some have the capacity to sustain their own ministry efforts, most cannot. More than twenty years ago when Greg Elsdon was principal of the Churches of Christ Theological College, he wrote an article declaring that congregational autonomy threatens the ability of Churches of Christ to witness with integrity to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. His proposal was for the movement to "work with characteristic vigor for the rediscovery of a lively interdependence and mutuality."¹⁹ Elsdon defines the term autonomy, arguing that it was never meant to communicate absolute independence (as some congregations reflect today), it was supposed to communicate freedom from the imposition of institutional structures. The call for greater congregational interdependence was not simply for practical reasons, it has deep theological foundations. As the Disciples of Christ confession states, we are bound to God and to one another in a covenant of love.

In my proposal for an orthodox trinitarianism I advocate for *perichoresis* as an image of God's love that is expressed through the church by inviting us into the perichoretic dance. The image of God in *perichoresis* is mutual indwelling and interdependence. One cannot exist without the other and by their very existence each bears the revelation to the other. If the church created by the mission of God bears the image of God, then we ought to be an interdependent body that reflects this image. This is how God is revealed and how the church is most effective in joining with God's mission.

19. Greg Elsdon, "Congregational Autonomy: Bane or Blessing?," *Churches of Christ Theological College Journal - REO*. Autumn (1999): 12.

- How do you think Churches of Christ understand autonomy today? Is it healthy?
- How do you think *perichoresis* can inform church organization and mission?
- Do you think interdependence is a concept that can be widely accepted across Churches of Christ in South Australia?
- Is there a missional practice associated with this task?
- What does Scripture have to say to us about the body of Christ?

Session 5:

The Lord's Supper and being God's sent ones

*"In the house of God, there is always the table of the Lord."*²⁰ – Alexander Campbell

*"Our practice, therefore, is neither to invite nor reject particular classes of persons, but to spread the table in the name of the Lord, for the Lord's people, and allow all to come who will, each on his own responsibility"*²¹ – Isaac Errett

The most central feature of worship for Churches of Christ is the gathering of the people of God around the Lord's table. Different Christian traditions will refer to this practice as celebrating the Eucharist, The Lord's Supper or Communion. Within the tradition of Churches of Christ this is most commonly referred to as communion. For Thomas Campbell, communion was a central practice for Christian worship that ought to unify Christians. Communion is a biblical practice initiated by Jesus with his disciples and practiced regularly by the early church every time they gathered. For Campbell, no humanly devised systems were to exclude believers from the table. This belief was shared by his son Alexander, and Barton Stone. In response to the restrictive practices of some Christian traditions that excluded Christians from the table if they didn't adhere to the correct confession, the founders of the movement sought to host an open table. For Alexander Campbell it was one of the few ordinances (sacraments) of the church authorized by Scripture and was essential for every gathering of believers. The other two ordinances were believer's baptism by immersion and keeping the Lord's Day (gathering for worship weekly).

The practice of communion has been discussed and debated throughout the life of the movement with particular focus on who can participate and who cannot. While an

20. Powell, Hicks, and McKinzie, *Discipleship in Community*, 119. Quoted from Alexander Campbell's, *The Christian System*, 257.

21. Foster et al., *Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement*, 492. Errett is described as a second-generation leader of the movement along with Robert Richardson (Alexander Campbell's biographer).

open table was the preference, arguments crept in from time to time concerning the method through which someone was baptized and confessed their faith. Isaac Errett and Robert Richardson addressed this as the next generation of leadership emerged for the movement, insisting that we would neither invite nor debar people who sought out the Lord's table because it is not our invitation to issue, it is Christ's alone.

In the Australian context however, the issue of baptism by immersion became the measure by which someone was allowed to participate in communion in the late 19th century. This issue was divisive for the formation of the Evangelical Association of Churches of Christ in South Australia. Before the end of the century a concession was made to allow for a certain level of freedom of expression so long as associated churches did not break bread with the unimmersed.²² This rule began to relax somewhat through the 20th century, particularly with the emergence of ecumenical activity and most Churches of Christ in SA today will host an open table as our founders intended.

The debates may continue in Churches of Christ but the more important conversation is, what is God doing in and through us each time we gather for communion? We have given such significance to this practice in Churches of Christ that the communion table is centrally located in our worship space and the communion celebration was centrally located in our order of worship. The standard practice across our churches however has been flexible in the 21st century and some churches intentionally host communion at the end of a worship service. This has an intentional missional posture. In the breaking of the bread and the drinking of the cup, though a symbolic act, the Spirit of God forms and transforms God's people to be participants in the eschatological announcement of God's kingdom unfolding through the lives of the disciples who gather.

Many contemporary theologians follow Jürgen Moltmann's lead in reflecting on our participation in the Messianic feast, the celebration in the death and resurrection of Christ that proclaims a new future. The vision of participating in a Messianic way of life means that Christ is present at all tables as God's people live into the announcement of the Christian hope of salvation and participation in the life of God. Gordon Stirling

22. Taylor, *The History of Churches of Christ*, 38–39.

suggests that all tables we meet at then become the Lord's table.²³ Alan Roxburgh and Martin Robinson suggest that communion is the primary context for forming a Eucharistic community that not only embodies a transformed way of life together, but is the context through which the ecclesiology of the church is reformed.²⁴ Because when we encounter Jesus at other tables through the week, we bring those stories back to the community of faith, where we reflect, confess, repent and allow the transformative activity of the agency of God to continue to form us each time we gather around the table of the Lord as a community of faith.

- How do you think Churches of Christ understand the significance of the Lord's Supper practiced weekly in our worship?
- How do you think the perichoretic dance of the trinity is expressed through communion?
- How do you think the practice of communion can be a missional activity of the church? How are we God's sent people?
- How does Scripture inform us about the practice of breaking bread in the name of Jesus?

23. Stirling, *Churches of Christ: Interpreting Ourselves for the New Century*, 19.

24. Roxburgh and Robinson, *Practices for the Refounding of God's People*, 161–64.

Session 6:

Believers baptism and the eschatological mission of God

*“No one can believe, repent, make confession, or be baptized by proxy, or upon another person’s confession.”*²⁵ – Alexander Campbell

*“It is in immersion, accordingly, that the pertinent believer puts off “the body of the sins of the flesh” and becomes a partaker of the benefits of the death of Christ, and it is in it also that he is raised again with him “to walk in newness of life.”*²⁶ – Robert Richardson

Believers’ baptism by immersion has long been a linchpin issue for the Stone Campbell movement. Foster indicates that baptism by immersion was at the core of Alexander Campbell’s reform.²⁷ Emerging out of a context where infant baptism was standard practice, Campbell’s extensive studies and biblical examination on what was and was not divinely authorized regarding the practice of baptism became fodder for intense debates. Baptism by immersion was the means by which people received God’s grace for the remission of sins. Upon confession of faith, one was immersed, then in their rising out of the water, participates in a transforming life as a disciple of Jesus.

Unfortunately for some elements of the movement it became a means of exclusion, causing them to embody sectarian behavior. Barton Stone strongly advocated for inclusion of all who confessed Jesus as Lord and Campbell certainly lent in Stone’s direction. The point of contention was inclusion of the unimmersed in fellowship around the Lord’s Table. In fact, the formation of the Evangelical Union of Churches of Christ in South Australia in the late 19th century imposed a commitment upon all associated congregations that no church would knowingly fellowship with the unimmersed at the Lord’s Table.²⁸ The consequence of such action was exclusion from the Union.

25. Foster et al., *Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement*, 58.

26. Richardson, *Principles of the Reformation*, 81.

27. Foster, *A Life of Alexander Campbell*, 1.

28. Taylor, *The History of Churches of Christ*, 38–39.

Hicks and Taylor offer a helpful summary of Alexander Campbell's thinking on the matter of baptism. Though Campbell had strong views on the biblical mandate for baptism by immersion, he ultimately saw the practice as a means of grace for the confessing believer.²⁹ Though Campbell's preference was for people to follow the instruction of the New Testament (even re-baptizing those who experienced pedobaptism), Campbell preferenced the desire of the heart of a disciple over ritual.³⁰ This leniency on the act of baptism has caused elements of the movement to reconsider the requirement in light of growing ecumenical dialogue. Cornwell reflects that the Disciples of Christ, for instance, have regarded it inappropriate to require re-baptism, inviting open membership and participation in the life of the church.³¹ The Disciples of Christ have participated in a recent ecumenical dialogue concluding the importance of emphasis on God's grace (infant baptism), and personal response to God's grace (adult baptism). They resolved that all practices of baptism ought to be equally recognized if the Church were to pursue the quest of unity.³²

Hicks and Taylor make room for this indicating that for Campbell the transformed life in the image of Christ and the character of the believer was more important than a command for ritual.³³ While this caused problems for Campbell within the ranks of the movement, his accommodation of a broader church is summed up in this principle, "Campbell did not devalue the faith of the unimmersed, but called the unimmersed to the assurance that God gives through a more biblical practice of baptism."³⁴

The practice of baptism by immersion is still an important sacrament for Churches of Christ to participate in. The image of baptism offered by the Apostle Paul in Romans 6:1-11 is still a powerful biblical image of being immersed in Christ. The water is symbolic of dying to the old life and being raised again into a new life in Christ. This is

29. Hicks and Taylor, *Down in the River to Pray*, Loc 1683.

30. Hicks and Taylor, *Down in the River to Pray*, Loc 1832.

31. Cornwell, *Freedom in Covenant*, 50.

32. Foster et al., *Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement*, 64-65.

33. Hicks and Taylor, *Down in the River to Pray*, Loc 1856.

34. Hicks and Taylor, *Down in the River to Pray*, Loc 1964.

an important image in joining in with the perichoretic dance, being united with Christ in his death and resurrection.³⁵ Powell, Hicks and McKinzie talk about baptism as a ‘communal experience of God’, a visible sign of unity, and commitment to follow Jesus.³⁶ It is a public rehearsal of the redemptive story of God in the life of discipleship and bears witness to God’s mission.³⁷

Baptism by immersion has some practical considerations for Churches of Christ in South Australia. It ought to still bear significance in the life of the church. Each baptismal candidate is participating in the rehearsal of the drama of the perichoretic dance in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit as an eschatological announcement of the transforming nature of immersion into the death, burial and resurrection of Christ. It is a witness to the churches’ participation in God’s mission. Yet it ought not be an imposition.

The invitation to participate in the dance through baptism is at the heart of our practice, but it does not exclude our brothers and sisters in Christ of other traditions from fully participating in the life of the church. Some of our preoccupation with the issue of baptism is due to Christians of other traditions joining our churches. The issue of baptism by immersion doesn’t appear to be as significant as it once used to be and this is reflected in the many church constitutions that have been changed to acknowledge the different ways people in the Christian tradition understand their participation in Christ. However, what should be of more concern to us is that fact that many of our baptistries have been collecting dust for a long time. This is not only due to the fact that membership growth is through the transfer of Christians from other traditions, but that the church is not seeing new people come to faith and responding through the act of baptism.

35. Romans 6:5

36. Powell, Hicks, and McKinzie, *Discipleship in Community*, 134.

37. Powell, Hicks, and McKinzie, *Discipleship in Community*, 128–31. Here they offer six components for a baptismal liturgy that bears witness to the activity of God in the life of discipleship.

- Do Churches of Christ still regard baptism by immersion a cornerstone ordinance of the church? Is it still an important practice in the celebration of Christian community?
- How do you think the perichoretic dance of the trinity is expressed through baptism?
- In what way is the practice of baptism by immersion a missional activity of the church? How does it define our missional practice?
- How does Scripture inform us about the practice of baptism and discipleship?

Session 7:

The community of believers and mutual ministry of God's people

“Any Christian, ‘may of right to preach, baptize, and dispense the supper, as well as pray for all ... when circumstances demand it’.”³⁸ – Alexander Campbell

“Ministry is something every Christian is ordained for in baptism.”³⁹ – Robert Cornwell

The priesthood of all believers is a term often referenced in Churches of Christ to explain why there is no clerical office or hierarchy of leadership. It also explains the mutual participation of all believers and why anyone who is a member of a congregation can participate in ministry. This includes taking on leadership roles in church governance or leading a ministry area, and administering sacraments such as the Lord's Supper or Baptism of believers. This inclusive nature of every one participating in ministry (though this is traditionally limited to those baptized by immersion) is not unique to Churches of Christ but it certainly raises questions among those who visit a Churches of Christ congregation if their experience of Christianity is informed by older traditions. One of the reactions against clerical hierarchy was to enable followers of Jesus in the life of the church to participate equally. Where other traditions may refer to the laity, Churches of Christ do not make the same distinction between clerical roles and the roles of others. All are invited to participate in Christ.

Alexander Campbell's anti-clerical stance built upon what had already been declared by Barton Stone and Thomas Campbell in their founding documents. This was to release the people of God from the oppression of systems of control and enable greater freedom of participation in the life of the church. Alexander Campbell advocated for the right for all Christians to exercise their gifts and abilities, whether it be preaching, teaching or administering the sacraments. It wasn't an 'anything goes' approach however. Christians needed to be appropriately qualified, and this was

38. Foster et al., *Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement*, 524.

39. Cornwell, *Freedom in Covenant*, 57.

measured by biblical standards testing a person's character and maturity in the faith. Campbell's preference was for congregations to be led by appointed elders, usually a lead elder and one or two appropriately qualified members of the congregation were responsible for the administration of the sacraments. Campbell's influence developed the culture of elder led congregations rather than appointed professional clergy.

Cornwell's quote that every baptized believer is ordained for ministry, certainly falls in line with what Campbell advocated. While this is encouraging and liberating, there has been a temptation and often a practice throughout Churches of Christ to view this liberty as participation without accountability. Each individual member, grafted into the body of Christ through baptism, is grafted into a community of mutual accountability reflecting the nature of God – the trinitarian dance around - *perichoresis*. What kinds of discernment processes exist in churches today that encourage accountability for how believers participate in the ministry of the church? Is it simply a show of hands to see who can fill a spot on the roster? Or are there processes in place to form disciples for the mission of God in every aspect according to their Spirit gifted ability?

There are two more important ecclesiological aspects that need to be acknowledged for participation. First of all, as Catherine LaCugna expresses at the heart of her doctrine of the Trinity, there is no subordination, inequality or hierarchy. "Communion in the Spirit of God means that all persons, while irreducibly unique, exist together as equal partners in Christ."⁴⁰ This reflects *perichoresis*, communicating the image of God in which we are invited to participate and functionally reflect in the life of the church. Secondly, Graham Buxton urges a rethink on the separation between worship and mission. Participating in the ministry of all believers is not limited to a task performed in worship. Nor is worship isolated from our concern for the world around us or the call to participate with God in it. Buxton draws on Jürgen Moltmann to affirm the privilege each believer has in participating in the prophetic ministry that emerges out of their gathering.⁴¹ Sacraments invite the people of God to surrender to being restored in God's image. The liturgy of worship informs and sends us to participate in God's

40. LaCugna, "The Practical Trinity," 682.

41. Buxton, *Dancing in the Dark*, 159–60.

mission. Participation in worship is inextricably intertwined with the revelation of, and participation with, the perichoretic dance of God's activity in the world. For the community of believers, participating in mutual ministry means that practices in worship enable us to theologically reflect on the dynamic of God's mission and draws us back to the principles of restoration. This is not for the sake of restoring ideals, it is so we might also participate in the life of the early church. "It compels us to approach theology as disciples called to participate together in God's mission."⁴²

- How do you view the priesthood of believers in Churches of Christ today? Has ministry become more structured or is it pretty loose?
- How do you understand the perichoretic dance in the context of the mutual ministry of believers?
- How can the priesthood of believers be viewed as missional practice and not simply limited to tasks in Sunday worship?
- Is there a specific missional practice associated with this study?
- How does Scripture inform us about the participation of all God's people in ministry?

42. Powell, Hicks, and McKinzie, *Discipleship in Community*, 153.

APPENDIX J

Artifact

Churches of Christ in South Australia

Movement and Identity

Participating in the life of God's mission

Welcome [QR code/link for video]

This study guide is a resource produced out of some research I conducted with accredited Churches of Christ ministers in South Australia. This is a product of my Doctor of Ministry thesis titled '*Constructing a theological framework that revitalizes the missional nature of Churches of Christ in South Australia*'. The aim of the six studies offered here is to help people understand and participate in the movement of Churches of Christ in South Australia. It may even be a helpful resource for Churches of Christ contexts elsewhere.

To offer some orientation, I have included a brief history of the emergence of Churches of Christ. This introduction also includes a proposal for how we might understand God and mission as we engage with this study. Finally, there is some orientation for how to use this resource.

It is my hope that each participant will capture what is at the heart of this movement and be inspired about how to participate with God's mission through Churches of Christ congregations.

Mark Riessen

A brief history

“The principle which was inscribed on our banners when we withdrew from the ranks of the sects, was, ‘Faith in Jesus as the true Messiah, and obedience to him as our Lawgiver and King, the only test of Christian character, and the only bond of Christian union, communion, and cooperation, irrespective of all creeds, opinions, commandments, and traditions of men’.”

Alexander Campbell, *The Christian System*, January 2nd, 1835.

Churches of Christ is best described as biblical, sacramental, missional and a mutual ministry of all believers’ tradition. We have a general orthodox understanding of the Triune God who has a mission of salvation in the world that has been initiated through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and is ongoing. We, the church, are invited to participate in that mission.

Churches of Christ is part of a broader global Christian movement of churches called the Stone-Campbell movement. This is predominantly a movement of Irish and Scottish immigrant Christians to the early 19th century American frontier. This movement was initiated by two key people, former Presbyterian ministers, who are responsible for the following founding documents. The *Last Will and Testament of the Springfield Presbytery* (by American born Barton Stone & colleagues, 1804) and the *Declaration and Address* (by Irish born Thomas Campbell, 1809). These act as points of reference for the movement committed to propagating New Testament principles as the original standard and only constitution for the formation of the Christian church. They were ultimately committed to the restoration of the ancient order of things according to New Testament principles and advocated for the unity of the Christian Church. This meant a rejection of sectarianism and denominationalism which is why Churches of Christ do not recite creeds and confessions of faith. These were seen by the founders to be a form of exclusion of fellow Christians in worship.

Thomas Campbell’s son, Alexander Campbell, along with his colleague, Walter Scott, picked up the mantle of leadership for the movement. Joining with Barton Stone, the union of the movement took place in Lexington, Kentucky, USA in 1832. This study seeks to explore the key features shaping the identity of Churches of Christ in SA & NT out of this origin story.

South Australian Churches of Christ were heavily influenced by Alexander Campbell. Thomas Magarey was a pivotal character in Adelaide enabling this influence in 1846, distributing Alexander Campbell’s published work promoting his restorationist ideas. By 1855 three churches were established and, in the 1860’s, British and American evangelists from the movement were sent to South Australia to help preach the gospel in this pioneering community, out of which more churches were established. Few of these churches still exist today. Instead, what we have is the legacy of churches planted by those churches. These Churches of

Christ congregations make up what we refer to today as the Conference of Churches of Christ in SA & NT Inc.

A proposal for how we think about God and God's mission

This study proposes a framework for understanding and talking about who God is. This is stated as trinitarian in nature. It affirms how Alexander Campbell describes the nature of God, "In our Christian religion we have a 'divine nature', and we have three persons – FATHER, the WORD [JESUS] and the HOLY SPIRIT". It also affirms what is broadly accepted in the Christian tradition and how we talk about who God is. The term 'God' needs some explanation. When we refer to God we are referring to the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit as unique yet equal and collaborative partners in an interdependent relationship of love. Within this trinitarian relationship is the full expression of God's love which is poured out for the world. This relationship is also an expression of the missional nature of God and is described by many Christian thinkers as *perichoresis*. 'Peri' meaning around, and '*choresis*' meaning a choreographed dance. The full expression of the term literally means 'a dance around'.

Each expression of the Godhead has a unique yet equally important role to play in expressing God's mission in the world. In *perichoresis*, the Father initiates, the Son incarnates and the Holy Spirit invites. As the church, we are the sent people of God who respond to the invitation to participate in God's mission, foretastes of God's kingdom coming, as we join the dance and embody the love God pours out through us.

This study is not just a resource to help you understand what is distinctive about Churches of Christ. It also invites you to consider who God is and how the nature of God informs our mission as a church. God is a missionary God, who invites us to be a missionary church in everything we do. This relationship is one that God initiates with us and constantly invites us to discover more and more about as we listen, act, reflect, and discover what God is doing among us.

You are engaging with a product exploring a theological framework that seeks to revitalize the missional nature of Churches of Christ. It is hoped that people who are part of Churches of Christ congregations will discover more about the movement they are a part of along with practical and meaningful ways to participate.

The design of this study guide

There are six themes laid out in this study for engagement. The first study sets up a practice of dwelling with Scripture that you are invited to practice for each study. Aside from study 1 which sets up the practice to include in subsequent studies, each study is designed to take more than one meeting to work through. A recommended use of this study is as follows:

- Each participant reads the contents of the study prior to meeting.

- When you meet, watch the short video by scanning the QR code or using the weblink, then participate in the first question for each study which will include engaging with Scripture.
- Review the rest of the questions for reflection before you conclude the meeting but don't discuss them yet.
- Prompted by the questions, reflect and participate in the theme of the study, then meet again and respond to the rest of the questions in that study.

Each study requires at least two meetings to work through the theme and reflect on participation. The hope is that you will revisit each study from time to time as you begin to participate in the practices that are recommended.

Ultimately, this study is designed to inform people about why Churches of Christ is invested in certain ideas and practices, how to engage with the Christian story through Churches of Christ today, and how this informs our participation in the missional nature of Churches of Christ.

Each study is laid out in three stages:

Discover: This is an opportunity to discover a little bit about the history of Churches of Christ and where certain ideas and practices have come from, and why they are important.

Engage: Following your discovery of a particular aspect of Churches of Christ, this is an opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of it through your experience of the church today. Consider how this theme is experienced within contemporary Churches of Christ settings. Explore new and current thinking, gaining fresh insights into what Churches of Christ might look like today.

Participate: This is where the action is. This study is not designed to be a theoretical exercise but to invite you to participate in the movement. These are designed as missional practices, or ways we can begin to participate in the mission of God out of what we are learning. A missional practice is designed to help you attend to God, discover more about what God is up to, and practice a response to God's invitation.

Study 1: Why start with Scripture?

[Insert QR code/link for video here]

Discover

One of the first things people generally notice about Churches of Christ is that there is no explicitly stated creed. This has been intentional since the beginning of the movement in the early 19th century. Avoiding prescriptive statements of faith was not due to laziness or neglect, but to ensure that what forms the people of God is a careful study of Scripture as the primary source of revelation.

Why study the Scriptures? Because it is foundational for Christian faith and discipleship. Scripture challenges and provokes us. It invites us out of the echo chamber of our community and culture to hear from God. Scripture reveals to us God's word, and the revelation of the Word made flesh in the Messiah, Jesus Christ.

A prominent founder of the movement, Alexander Campbell, had an extraordinary experience through the discipline of reading Scripture. He believed that knowledge of God could be obtained through the reading of Scripture. What he encountered was a further revelation of the assurance of his own salvation in Jesus Christ. Reading Scripture is not just a cognitive exercise, but an experience and encounter with the living God. For Campbell, surrendering to the authority of Scripture was a spiritual exercise, allowing the Holy Spirit to reveal the word of God and initiate transformation.

Scripture has been seen throughout history as providing a moral code for the life of Christian discipleship. Not only does it offer assurance of our salvation in Christ, but reveals a way of life in response to God's saving grace. Scripture, as God's word being revealed, invites us into a dynamic encounter with God where we witness to the presence and activity of God in, through and around us. Through this encounter we receive assurance, challenge, and an invitation to participate with God in the world.

Engage

There are multiple methods and approaches to reading Scripture but here are some principles offered as a guide:

1. **Scripture should be read with others.** Scripture should not only be read alone but in community, and in dialogue with the broader Christian story. The writings found in Scripture were originally read as communal documents. How do others hear what you are hearing in Scripture? How do we discern the truths revealed in Scripture together? How does communal reading make us more aware of ourselves, others and God?
2. **Scripture reads us.** Often, we bring our agendas and issues to the text looking for answers, solutions and justification. What if Scripture had something new to say to us? Our quest in studying Scripture is to know

more of God. This requires a significant degree of humility. Allowing Scripture to read us invites a posture of surrender to learn something new and be open to transformation by the Holy Spirit.

3. **Scripture moves us to respond.** Reading Scripture isn't simply a theoretical exercise. It contains the story of how the people of God encountered the activity of God transforming the world in which we live. This dynamic invites us to participate in God's mission. This moves us and transforms us to embrace God's agenda for the renewal of all things.

This study is not designed to be prescriptive but to invite readers to consider the ongoing discipline of allowing Scripture to form, and inform the life of discipleship. In the tradition of Churches of Christ, every person who confessed Jesus as Lord and committed to the task of participation in the life of the church, was expected to be informed by Scripture. It was believed that attention to the biblical texts would help Christians participate in the restoration of New Testament principles and the unity of the church. Ultimately, Scripture served an important missional agenda. The revelation of God would transform the church who was united and, by their unity was a witness to the world. This does not suggest that Christians all hold the same opinions about theology and biblical interpretation. Diversity of opinion is what is celebrated in this dialogue of learning from each other. However, the essential elements of the Christian faith would be revealed.

Participate

Where do we start? Apart from saying, 'by opening your bibles together' this study suggests a process for opening God's people to the Scriptures. One problem we encounter with bible study is going to the bits we like and staying there. The first part of the process is to be open to the whole story of God.

1. Discern a book of the bible you might start working through in a group. If you don't know where to start, try the revised common lectionary and follow the suggested reading for the day or follow a bible reading plan offered through a bible app. There are numerous starting points. To get you started here we'll suggest John 1:1-18.
2. Consider how the group encounters the text. Try sitting in a way that helps you feel relaxed so you can hear the text. An ancient Christian practice called *lectio divina*, is to have a passage of Scripture read aloud. This doesn't just occur once but at least 3 times. The purpose is to slow down your encounter with Scripture, hear the word of God, and consider a response. It's a spiritual/missional practice. Here's a suggestion for how it works:
 1. First reading. Someone reads aloud as listeners close their eyes and listen. Don't analyze the text but allow it to wash over you. Allow yourself to be caught by a word or a phrase and stay there. Why has the Spirit caught your attention here? After the reading is a period of silence.
 2. Second reading. Someone else reads the text while others listen. Is there something new that captures your attention this time? What

do you think the Spirit of God is inviting you to consider in this text?
A period of silence.

3. Third reading. Someone else (a third reader) reads while others listen. In this reading listen for the invitation of God. How is God inviting you to respond? What activity is God inviting you into?
3. After a third period of silence, share your experience. What was it like? What do you think God is saying through the text? What does this Scripture reveal to us about who God is? What is God doing in the text? What does it reveal about what God might be up to in the world? Did any questions arise for you from this text? Listening for one another is a further discernment of listening for the word of God. If people feel comfortable, share what you think the invitation is? Is there an invitation for the group to consider? Is there a challenge or an encouragement you're avoiding? Is this experience different from how you normally engage with Scripture?
4. Spend some time in prayer together.
5. Consider how the exercise of engaging Scripture has moved you and informed you. Christians do not exist in isolation, you are part of an ongoing story of generations of Christians who have also been informed by this Scripture. What do you know of what others have learned? How does your listening and discernment relate to what the church has been hearing collectively? How has God been revealed and what is God's invitation as you consider participation in God's mission?

Study 2: Does God's mission unite us?

[Insert QR code/link for video here]

Discover

A plea for Christian unity is at the heart of the movement we call Churches of Christ. Unity of Christians is not the goal but an outcome of coming together around Scripture and discovering God together. The founders of this movement believed that the truths revealed to us through Scripture would bring Christians together for a common purpose, to participate in God's mission of salvation and reconciliation. They believed in this so much that they were willing to put to death their allegiances to denominational structures so they could fall in with the broader Christian church. Churches of Christ was not intended to be the creation of another denomination, but the deconstruction of denominationalism so that Christians would find their common unity in Christ through a much broader association of Christians of all traditions.

In 1832, people who were part of Barton Stones 'Christians' and Alexander Campbell's 'Disciples' who all held to the same vision of this free association of Christians, came together to initiate the union of the movement. One of the most important things to acknowledge about this union was that it was not compelled by conformity, but a voluntary association of people committed to following Jesus. This voluntary association required humility and the relinquishing of things that may cause division, such as confessions that tested one's faith.

The mantra, 'in the essentials unity, the non-essentials liberty, and in all things love' became a commonly quoted line throughout the history of the movement to promote the vision of unity. What is important to acknowledge is that the people of God always have been and always will be a diverse group of people, however, in our diversity we begin with our common unity in Christ and our confession that Jesus is Lord. The essential element of unity is our confession in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. This confession, at the heart of the movement speaks of God's activity in Christ, reveals to us the nature of who God is, and invites us into God's mission of hope for the world.

Engage

There are many things that we may disagree about, and that is the inherent beauty of Churches of Christ, we are allowed to disagree. We must do this [disagree] with grace and humility, in conversation with one another and the enduring legacy of the Christian tradition. We find our unity in this, the essential confession which has endured since the Christian church first emerged. However, like those who have gone before us, we will always have a diversity of opinions about many things including how we think about God, how God participates in our lives, and how we interact as God's people in society. These don't need to divide us, but can bring rigor and integrity to our relationships and developing maturity in Christ.

The critical element in this consideration is love. Renowned Churches of Christ minister, Gordon Stirling, suggests reversing our mantra to start with love. In all things we have love for God and one another. The virtue of love is modelled within the trinitarian nature of God. The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit exist within a mutual, indwelling, self-sacrificing, equal relationship of love. For God to be love, God expresses love within the Triune relationship and pours out this love for us, inviting God's people into the mutuality of God's love. The image of the body of Christ used by the Apostle Paul to describe the nature of the church (Romans 12:1-8; 1 Corinthians 12:12-31; Ephesians 4:1-16) appreciates the diversity of each part of the body while finding common unity in Christ. The bond of love that unites God's people in this image is the same bond of love expressed in the diversity of the unity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. We are one as God is one in love.

What is important to remember is that the body of Christ does not only exist within our own congregation. The wholeness of the body of Christ is realized among all Christians. Those who confess Christ is Lord are our fellow collaborators in God's mission. We cannot participate in this mission in isolation from one another. The body of Christ functions most effectively when we are in relationship with God together. So, what might this look like?

Participate

One of the strengths of the early church was to be known by their acts of love. In English, love is a word with varying meanings so it might be useful to reflect on the meaning of *agape*, the word used in the New Testament for God's love and the love we share with each other. Many have used words like compassion, kindness or sibling love to describe this love. *Agape* (love) is described as "to love, value, esteem, feel and manifest generous concern for, be faithful towards; to delight in; to set store upon." Churches of Christ founders had a commitment to the restoration of the New Testament church, so this practice of love ought to endure in the movement today. It was their love for God and love for one another that was distinctive in society. This distinctive practice is how Christians embodied God's mission in the world.

- Practice dwelling in Romans 12:1-21. As you discover what Scripture reveals about the character of God and God's mission, what are the habits or practices you are feeling compelled to embody in your life?
- What do acts of love look like? Describe them.

When you meet again discuss the following:

- How might you embody acts of love as a community of faith? (with one another and towards others)
- How is Christian love distinguishable from social acts of kindness?
- How do people respond to you when they notice your distinctive acts of love?

- What are you learning about who God is and how God calls you to participate in Christ in your community and the world?
- Who are you reflecting on this with? Develop a practice of meeting with other Christians to reflect on how you are participating in God's mission together. What activities could you try out together? What are you learning?
- Does God's mission bring Christians together?

Study 3: Better together as one in Christ

[Insert QR code/link for video here]

Discover

One of the foundational values of Churches of Christ is freedom of local congregational expression. This means each congregation has the freedom to govern their own affairs, install their own local leadership, decide who they call into ministry, develop their own faith statements and decide the most appropriate ways to express ministry in their own local context. The drive towards this local autonomy developed out of a context where freedom of expression was a desired cultural value. It was also a reaction to oppressive hierarchical structures that inhibited this expression.

Originally, Churches of Christ congregations were very independent. However, in the mid 19th century, Alexander Campbell determined that congregations needed some orientation around biblical interpretation, and that churches could be more effective in their common mission if they worked more cooperatively. Assistance with applying Scripture in the local context helped to mitigate against false teaching in the midst of diverse ways of understanding Scripture. The establishment of Bethany College served the purpose of educating people in biblical literacy. This was not just for training preachers and evangelists, but all who wanted to gain a deeper understanding of Scripture. It was a resource for the churches. Cooperation meant they could achieve so much more together than what they could independently.

In Australia, the Churches of Christ movement has always seen the value of cooperation. The formal development of associations emerged shortly after congregations were established, and today we refer to these associations in each state as the Conference of Churches of Christ. Since the establishment of each state Conference from as far back as the late 19th century, these associations worked together in planting churches, training ministers, and dialogue that ensured we remained in conversation about matters of theology and biblical interpretation.

Engage

Our cooperative efforts are not limited to Churches of Christ. We have always participated in cooperative mission, and conversations with other denominations locally and broadly. We value a mutual desire to work cooperatively because, as the old saying of the movement goes, 'we are Christians only, but we are not the only Christians'. Our interdependence within the broader body of Christ bears with it a posture of humility and service. This is a core characteristic of Churches of Christ, to be self-emptying for the sake of the kingdom of God.

If we are to be image bearers of the Triune God, then moves towards independence being adopted is actually an inhibiting factor preventing us from

bearing witness to the good news displayed in this image. As the apostle Paul says to the Ephesian church, 'There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope' (Eph 4:4). Within the diversity of expression of the body, we can't say we don't need each other. We are bound together in God's love. The full expression of God's love is within the mutual interdependence of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The church is invited by God to abide in and witness to this image of God's love together through our acts of love towards one another and others.

This is the church performing the gospel together, when we bear the image of God. This image witnesses to the hope we have. Through the resurrection of Christ, we are bound by this hope and can do immeasurably more together than apart. While we value the freedom of local congregational autonomy, we cannot fully express the gospel with integrity as a dismembered body. We work towards interdependence not only for what we may offer others, but also for what we can learn and receive. This enables us to remain in conversation about what the gospel is, and how we embody this hope together. Our interdependent nature continues to form and transform us as the body of Christ that bears witness to God's love pouring out to the world.

We live within a culture that values competition and individual expression. The vision of interdependence (as desired in Christian unity) is an attractive countercultural message to a disconnected world. It is voluntary but we are compelled by the Spirit of God to explore this alternative. To truly embody our love for one another, we commit to meet together, share resources and participate in God's mission together.

Participate

In this study we advocate for a practice in listening. Listening requires a form of surrender, letting go. It means rather than trying to rescue a sense of lost identity or working tirelessly to help our local congregation survive, we listen for God and for what God is teaching us through our listening to the broader body of Christ. We let go of many things that occupy our time and attention and develop opportunities for conversations with other Churches of Christ congregations, or other churches in our local area. We may discover something about God and about ourselves that is life giving and inviting us to embody the hope of the gospel in ways we have not considered before.

- Scripture has a lot to say to us about the community of God's people and how we can participate in life together in Christ. Practice dwelling in Ephesians 4:1-16. What are some ways you and your congregation can strengthen relationships with:
 - Other churches in your community?
 - Other Churches of Christ congregations?

When you meet again discuss the following:

- If we had more active relationships with Christians from other congregations, how might that affect our gospel witness? Does it enhance or inhibit our witness?
- What do you think you might be able to learn from Christians in another Churches of Christ congregation or another denomination in your neighborhood?
- Try a practice of active listening with Christians who are not part of your congregation. If you were to learn something new would you consider integrating it into the way you live the life in Christian discipleship?
- How do you think your understanding of other Christian beliefs and practices might help build stronger cohesion for participation in God's mission?
- What resources might we share with other churches in order to be more effective in our witness? If it meant closing a program or redistributing resources in order to join in with something else in the broader body of Christ, what impact could this have?

Study 4: Formed and transformed by the Lord's Supper

[Insert QR code/link for video here]

Discover

Participating in communion during every gathering of the church for worship has been a core practice at the heart and foundation of Churches of Christ. It is one of the core ordinances of the movement. This remembrance of the Lord's Supper is central to the life and practice of the church. Part of the significance for Churches of Christ is the inclusive nature of the table, and as the movement took root and evolved, leaders insisted that no one has the right to invite or exclude someone from the table. It is the Lord's table and it is Christ our Lord who issues the invitation to all whom God loves.

The practice of sharing communion features as a catalyst for the formation of Churches of Christ. The infamous story of Thomas Campbell hosting a communion service with Presbyterians of different confessions shortly after his arrival in the United States in the early nineteenth century sparked controversy among his superiors. As an ordained Presbyterian minister, he knew the rules, communion was limited only to those who passed the test of faith and offered the token that gave them access to the table. This exclusive use of the most sacred sacrament went against every part of Campbell's being and his commitment for Christian unity. Years later, when the Union of the movement was formalized between Alexander Campbell, Barton Stone and associates, there was strong advocacy for an open table. Christians of all persuasions would be welcome at the table, regardless of their denominational background. This is the heartbeat of the movement; Churches of Christ seeks to model unity of Christians around the table of the Lord where God's people continue to be formed into the church God is calling into being.

The Lord's Table was not always open to all after the movement took root. In South Australia, the Evangelical Union of Churches of Christ formed late in the nineteenth century took an exclusivist stance on communion. They declared that no church would break bread with anyone who was not baptized by immersion. This stance changed dramatically throughout the twentieth century with the influence of the ecumenical movement. Today, Churches of Christ congregations are made up of Christians from every denominational background and all Christians are welcome to participate. However, there are often those who visit our worship services who have not confessed faith in Jesus. What does this core practice of our movement have to offer them? The discernment to participate is left to the individual 'whom God loves'. The church then discerns its pastoral practice of hospitality around the table.

Engage

Sharing communion weekly and participating in this sacred ritual with an open invitation to all, brings with it all kinds of gifts and challenges for Churches of Christ.

First, we must acknowledge the significance of the message it carries. Communion is sacred because it reminds us of the core essentials at the heart of the Christian faith. Jesus Christ, God incarnate, offered his body and blood as a sacrifice for all whom God loves - every person in the world. Jesus was crucified, died, buried and raised again on the third day. The elements of the bread and cup on the table and the gathering of the people of God signify Christ's presence.

Second, we share in this ritual of remembrance every time we gather as a church because we are people of the resurrection. The story of Christ's sacrifice that we remember around the table is a story of God's love and our hope. As the apostle Paul states in 1 Corinthians 11:26, we do this regularly to proclaim this hope we have in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is the proclamation that sits at the core of our being and forms us as a faith community. Churches of Christ is committed to practices of New Testament restoration. The early church broke bread in remembrance of Jesus every time they gathered and it is a practice instituted by Jesus with his disciples.

Third, the invitation is open because Christ is the host. A person's discernment to participate in communion is an exercise in self-examination, not being examined by others. The invitation to the table is to be grafted into the body of Christ. In our congregations today, many people are free to join a worship service without their belief system being examined. What does the Lord's Table communicate to all? God's gift of grace.

Fourth, regular participation in communion is crucial for our formation to be God's people in the world. Each time we come together at the table is an act of surrendering to the body of Christ. In communion with others we participate in confession, seek forgiveness and repent. In repentance we are formed and transformed in the story of Christ's death and resurrection. Participating in communion is about participating in the story of what God has done, what God is doing and what God is yet to do. We are sent as God's people from the table into the world, where we join other tables to proclaim the hope we have in the resurrection of Christ.

Fifth, our participation together signifies and celebrates our union in Christ. Taking communion is not limited to an individual experience, it's a communal event. Our focus is what we all have in common in our confession that Christ is Lord. This is why we have a common practice of drinking from our individual cups together as a celebration of our unity and oneness in Christ.

Participate

One of the most referred to passages of Scripture for this time of remembrance during communion is 1 Corinthians 11:17-34. You are encouraged to study this passage with others. Listen to the text using the suggestions offered in the first study in this series. It is helpful to use vs 23-29 as the core text to be read to the congregation every time you gather for communion. This offers us focus on the reason for participating, and the context of the invitation Christ offers.

Some things for further discussion here focus attention towards being the people of God formed and transformed around the Table of the Lord and sent into the world. Participating in communion invites us into the drama of God's kingdom unfolding in our midst.

When you meet again discuss the following:

- What does communion mean for you?
- People often think that if we participate in communion weekly it loses its meaning. Does this study change your perspective?
- Communion is about remembrance and being God's transformed people. How does this story and participation in communion shape your life as a follower of Jesus?
- The Lord's Table is a model of God's grace and hospitality extended towards us. How do you experience hospitality at other tables? Are you the host or guest? In what ways are you proclaiming resurrection hope at other tables throughout your week?
- Consider bringing stories of your experience of table fellowship back to your congregation. Create space in the worship service to tell these stories. When we tell and hear these stories, what are we learning about how God participates in the world, God's mission and God's invitation to us to participate?

Study 5: Dare to be identified

[Insert QR code/link for video here]

Discover

The study on communion acknowledged the significance of believers' baptism by immersion. This is another key ordinance of Churches of Christ. Like communion, believer's baptism by immersion is an ordinance because it is an order, an instruction from Scripture. The movement's founders were very committed in their restoration of the ancient order of things, to be guided by the instruction set out for the church in Scripture.

All of the founders emerged from a Christian tradition where infant baptism was common practice. Alexander Campbell was the one who spearheaded the argument for believers' baptism by immersion. It was the cornerstone issue at the center of his reform. According to Campbell, to truly be Christian, one would follow the commands of Scripture. To be a Christian, a person needed to have awareness of their own faith in Jesus, be able to confess for themselves their need for salvation, and upon confession of their sins, be baptized, being fully immersed under the water and raised again into a new life with Christ. Co-founder Walter Scott made famous the five-finger path to salvation. 1. A believer needs to have faith, 2. Repent, 3. Be baptized by immersion, 4. God will give the gift of the Holy Spirit, 5. God offers the gift of eternal life. Baptism was the pinnacle of a believer's response to God's grace and what followed were God's ongoing actions in the life of the believer.

To be baptized by immersion has been a significant mark of identification with the Christian church, in particular, this movement of Christians we know today as Churches of Christ. It was not believed that the water itself held any supernatural power to transform one's life. The act of baptism is an outward response to the transformation that had already occurred through an encounter with God, and having faith in response.

The insistence on baptism by immersion has often created a lot of tension in the movement. It became a practice that excluded some Christians from fellowship around the table and participation in the life of the church because they had not followed through on the instruction from Scripture to be baptized by immersion upon their own confession of faith. Where Barton Stone always advocated for the inclusion of all Christians around the table, no matter what their practice of baptism or form of confession, Alexander Campbell eventually conceded that the desire of the heart of a Christian was more important than the ritual they participated in.

Baptism by immersion is still the primary Churches of Christ practice as a discipleship pathway for those who confess faith in Jesus Christ. However, most churches today will recognize Christians of other traditions where this has not

been primary practice, and include them in full participation in the life of the church.

Engage

Believers' baptism by immersion is at the center of the discipleship pathway for all who come to faith in Jesus and participate in the life of the church. This holds deep theological significance for Churches of Christ.

First of all, Jesus was baptized. In the Gospel of Mark 1:9-15 Jesus' baptism marks a significant turning point in his life. In the moment he rises up out of the water, the Holy Spirit descends upon him and the voice of the Father identifies and speaks his approval of his Son. Jesus is immediately sent by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tested. Following this is the commencement of Jesus' ministry and the proclamation of the good news that the kingdom of God is near. The act of baptism becomes a moment in every disciple's life of joining with God in this mission.

Romans 6:1-11 also speaks of the theological significance of this practice. In the act of immersion, one's old life is put to death with Christ, buried with Christ beneath the surface of the water, then raised out of the water into a new life with Christ symbolizing resurrection. The ritual is a symbolic act of the work God has done and is continuing to do in the life of the believer. The act of baptism is participation in the drama of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit inviting us into the death and resurrection of Christ.

The word baptize, as understood in its original meaning literally means to immerse. So, to be baptized in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, the one being baptized is voluntarily responding to God's invitation to be immersed into the life of the trinity. The use of the word baptize in the Scriptures also implies an ongoing activity in the life of the believer. You have not been baptized, you are baptized. That is, there is a daily ongoing work of transformation and participation in the life of God. In baptism you are incorporated into God's ongoing mission of proclaiming good news to the world.

Finally, baptism is a communal celebration for the church. It is not just a celebration of what is happening in the life of an individual. It is a celebration of God's continuing work in the life of the faith community. At each baptismal service the whole community of faith gathers to celebrate and be reminded of their own baptism. Together, we are invited into and participate in the drama of God's mission being identified with Christ as sons and daughters of the living God.

Participate

- What does Mark 1:9-15 or Romans 6:1-11 mean for you? Practice dwelling in Scripture as set out in the first study to discover what God might be saying in the text.

- How often do you hear/share testimonies of baptism in your faith community? Can you recall your story of baptism and what it means for you?

When you meet again discuss the following:

- The common belief in Churches of Christ is that in your baptism, you are ordained into ministry. How does this resonate with you?
- If in baptism you are now identified as one who participates in God's ongoing mission, what do you think your contribution to the kingdom of God looks like, individually and as a community?
- If there are people in your broader interactive community who are curious about becoming a follower of Jesus, how would you introduce baptism to them?

Study 6: A responsibility to participate in ministry

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Discover

The invitation to participate in the ministry of the church is for all Christians in the belief and practice of Churches of Christ. This is referred to as the 'priesthood of all believers' or the 'mutual ministry' of all believers. This idea was not unique to this movement. In fact, it was championed by 16th century reformer Martin Luther. The idea is that the Spirit of God dwells among all God's people, gifting them the ability to serve and edify the ministry of the church. This means all Christians have an invitation and a responsibility to participate in ministry for the building up of the body of Christ. This is our act of service to God and one another.

The emphasis of every Christian ordained for service was promoted by Alexander Campbell and Barton Stone. The clerical office (formal ordained ministry) was originally rejected to make room for this emphasis of the whole body of Christ in service for God and one another. Campbell advocated that all Christians ought to have the right to teach, preach, baptize and administer communion. This is why visitors to Churches of Christ congregations will often notice that the appointed minister does not perform all tasks in worship. Following baptism, a believer is considered to be a priest in service to God, strengthening and broadening the ministry of the church.

Traditionally, the strength of a Churches of Christ congregation has not been in the appointment of an ordained minister but in the activation of the whole church for ministry. The emergence of particular ministers, set aside, trained, ordained and employed to lead churches is still a reasonably new innovation for Churches of Christ. This was not to diminish the priesthood of believers, but the church sets aside certain people in leadership roles to empower the congregation to participate in ministry. Even though Alexander Campbell did not advocate for a clergy-led church, he still ensured the appropriate appointment of leaders who would discern with the congregation who would perform tasks such as administering communion. For the first hundred years, congregations were led by elders and itinerant evangelists would occasionally preach. Today, Churches of Christ still has a strong culture of eldership led congregations. Certain people are called, set aside and employed as ministers to work with the elders in leading the church.

Engage

A great celebration for our movement is that God calls all Christians to participate in ministry. This includes those who have formal appointments to ministry and those who don't. All Christians form the priesthood with mutual love and respect for one another. Being part of the body of Christ means we are aware of the gifts of ministry service everyone around us has to offer, not just our own. This is a

huge relief because it means we participate in the ways we are called and offer meaning for us while others perform tasks they are called to and gifted for. The participation of believers requires discernment and humility in service. It is important to discern calling and how God's calling on a particular person's life is discerned within the community of faith.

We are called into a relationship with God and one another. This calling is an initiation of God's grace to us which we are to relay to one another. The good news embedded within this calling for all of us to participate in the life of the church in service to God and one another, is that all of us have access to ministry from one another and the ability to contribute to ministry for the sake of others. Being incorporated into the priesthood of believers is to share with one another and the world around us, the grace of God through our posture of love, humility and service. This giving and receiving is an expression of *perichoresis*. God's self-giving love poured out for us. In this relationship we are collaborators, mirroring the equality of participation of all and the partnership we share with one another in the balance of God's love and concern for the other.

At the heart of the mutual ministry of all believers is the denial of self for the sake of others. This means resisting the urge to put your own wants and needs before the community of faith. This is where discernment within the faith community is important. All Christians have a responsibility to participate in the priesthood of believers. This responsibility carries with it the act of humbly surrendering to God in the context of community and discerning participation. This means being aware of the needs of others, being aware of how your ministry contributes to the body of Christ and, in humility, being open to correction and guidance from one another. This is the priesthood of believers.

The Apostle Paul addresses this with the Corinthian church. "For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body..." (1 Cor 12:13a). Paul goes on to emphasize how the diverse parts of the body all work together in unity and that the functionality of each part has an effect on all other parts. He concludes, "Now you are the body of Christ and each one of you is a part of it." (1 Cor 12:27). When Paul talks about Christians being members of one body, he emphasizes self-awareness and awareness of others. In the next chapter, he follows with the punchline. In all that we do, if not in love, we gain nothing (1 Cor 13:3). Paul says to the Galatian church, "serve one another humbly in love." (Gal 5:13b). Within this context, he states love, kindness, gentleness (humility), self-control, joy, and faithfulness (Gal 5:22-23) as fruits of humble service. Humility requires a depth of honesty and to think less of self. This also requires vulnerability to receive honest feedback from others. In order to curate this space for vulnerability, a community needs to be able to develop trust in relationships with one another. There is no differentiation between a member of the church and an ordained minister other than that each, according to their calling, is humbly serving God. There is mutual accountability and responsibility between all members of the body no matter what their function. Ministry is our shared vocation.

Participate

To participate in the priesthood of all believers, it has been suggested that participants need to pay attention to their calling within the community and how that relates to and affects others. The invitation to the priesthood is a responsibility to be aware of yourself and others and how your participation edifies the church. This requires surrendering, humility, vulnerability and trust out of which the fruits of love, faithfulness, gentleness, joy and self-control are manifest.

Participating in the ministry of the church is not just an important part of identifying with Churches of Christ, it is at the core of participating in the mission of God. Participation is not limited to worship services, it must extend to participation with the perichoretic dance of God's mission of love in the world. We are extensions of a mission that is not our own.

- Practice dwelling in 1 Corinthians 12:12-27. What do you hear?

When you meet again discuss the following:

- What would the church miss out on if you didn't minister in the way God has called you to? How do you discern with others the most effective way to participate in ministry?
- What qualities do you notice in humble people?
- Are you aware of others in your congregation for whom you could create opportunities to participate in ministry? Do you need to step back to allow someone else to contribute? How might you mentor someone?
- How do we create safe spaces for helping people identify their gifts for participation in ministry? What spaces are created for conversation about how to discover and contribute your gift in ministry?
- How do you celebrate participation in ministry contexts outside Sunday worship?

Helpful Resources

Studying Scripture

A helpful resource for studying Scripture is the revised common lectionary. This offers various passages of Scripture for daily reflection.

<https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/>

Baptismal resource

A resource produced by Churches of Christ Australia on baptism can be found at

<https://www.churchesofchrist-sa.org.au/resources/baptism-resource>

General information about Churches of Christ

Information about Churches of Christ in South Australia & Northern Territory including our vision and mission statement can be found at

<https://www.churchesofchrist-sa.org.au/resources>

Information about Churches of Christ in Australia can be found at

<https://www.cofcaustralia.org/>

Other helpful resources

Some easily assessable books and resources that explore ideas that have and continue to shape Churches of Christ as a movement include:

Chapman, Graeme, *‘One Lord, One faith, One baptism: A history of Churches of Christ in Australia.’* Melbourne, VIC: Vital Publications, 1979.

https://webfiles.acu.edu/departments/Library/HR/restmov_nov11/www.mun.ca/rels/restmov/texts/gchapman/olfb/OLFB00.HTM

Cornwall, Robert D., *‘Freedom in Covenant: Reflections on the Distinctive Values and Practices of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)’*. Eugene, OR: WIPF & Stock Publishers, 2015.

Powell, Mark E., Hicks, John Mark, McKinzie, Greg. *‘Discipleship in Community: A theological vision for the future’*. Abilene, TX: ACU Press, 2020.

Stirling, Gordon. *‘Churches of Christ: Reinterpreting Ourselves for the New Century’*. Melbourne, VIC: Vital Publications 1999.

Various research publications on Churches of Christ by Dr. Kerrie Handasyde can be found at <https://staff.divinity.edu.au/staff/kerrie-handasyde/>

Some helpful books that explore participating in God’s mission include:

Lau Branson, Mark and Roxburgh, Alan J., *‘Leadership, God’s Agency, and Disruptions: Confronting Modernity’s Wager’*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2020.

Moltmann, Jürgen, *'The Open Church: Invitation to a Messianic Lifestyle'*. London: SCM Press, 2012.

Wright, Christopher, J. H., *'The Mission of God's People: A Biblical Theology of the Church's Mission'*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2010.

BRIEF VITA

Mark Riessen was born in Blackwood, South Australia, on April 14, 1976. He grew up in Adelaide and participated in a Church of Christ congregation where his parents were in leadership. In 1999, he moved to Melbourne, where he completed an Advanced Diploma of Ministry and a Bachelor of Theology at the Churches of Christ Theological College in 2003. In 2001, he married Verity, who moved from Adelaide to join him in Melbourne for his final year at college. Halfway through 1999, Mark commenced a role as youth minister at the Knoxfield Church of Christ, where he was subsequently appointed the senior minister in the middle of 2002. Mark and Verity moved back to Adelaide in 2007, where Mark commenced as Ministry Team Leader at Blackwood Church of Christ. In the middle of 2013, he commenced as the Mission and Ministry Director for Churches of Christ in South Australia. Mark completed a Masters of Theology through Stirling Theological College in 2016. As part of his role working with Churches of Christ, Mark commenced as Director of the Tabor Churches of Christ Center at Tabor College in 2016, where he teaches Churches of Christ History and Identity and in the field of practical theology. He currently works as the Mission and Ministry Director and still serves as part of the Faculty of Ministry Practice at Tabor College in Adelaide. Mark and Verity have three children, Daniel, Ayla, and Amber, and currently live in Adelaide, South Australia.