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Ecclessiology Today And Its Potential To Serve A Missionary Church

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Abstract: This article engages the theme of the 2017 meeting of the American Society of Missiology: “Missiology’s Dialogue Partners: Practitioners and Scholars Conversing about the Future of Mission.” It seeks to contribute to that conversation by providing a survey of the discipline of ecclesiology with an eye towards how it might learn from the field of mission and how it might inform it. This exploration begins by defining some of the goals, methods and boundaries of the field of ecclesiology. It then considers three critical issues at the forefront of ecclesiological work today: 1) questions emanating from the ecumenical sphere; 2) shifting demographics within Christianity and corresponding calls for new ecclesial structures, and 3) the necessity of a more robust engagement between ecclesiology and the social sciences. The concluding section offers some reflections about how the current state of ecclesiology might provide glimpses of the future of ecclesiology and what light it might shine on the future of missiology.

Ecclesiology Today and its Potential to Serve a Missionary Church

The twentieth century is often referred to as “the century of the church,” and the first decades of the twenty-first century continue to explore the nature and mission of Christian communities.

Conversations about the church’s mission, its structure, relation to the world, and credibility have migrated to the center of Christian systematic theology. Ecclesiological questions, however, have not always been at the forefront; in fact, up until the time of the Reformation, the church was generally not considered a separate locus of theological reflection (Pannenberg, 1997).¹ Interestingly, it is possible that the same reason why the church was, for a long time, not considered a distinct theological concern might, in fact, be the very reason why conversations about the church dominate today. Scholars speculate that for much of the Christian tradition the church was not treated separately precisely because it was not viewed as a discrete subject, but rather as integral to every theological theme. Reflections on the sacraments, Christology, soteriology, and morality were seen as inextricably connected to reflections on the church’s nature and purpose. Therefore, since the church was everywhere, it was nowhere by itself.

Today discussions of the church are everywhere, and the church as an explicit locus of theology often stands at the heart of the conversation. Thus, it seems that the tables have turned. Rather than discrete theological concerns being discussed with an assumption of the church’s essential role in the background, conversations about the church often take center stage amidst the realization that providing a satisfying account of this reality serves as a prerequisite for the Christian community’s ability to convey

its message effectively. Another catalyst for ecclesiology's move to the center has been proposed by Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen (2002) of Fuller Theological Seminary who notes that the rapid expansion of the ecumenical movement has placed ecclesiology at the center of Christian dialogue. Kärkkäinen (2002: 8) argues that "any talk about the unity of the church entities presupposes some tentative understanding of what the church is. One cannot unite entities without knowing what kind of organisms one is trying to put together." Ecclesiology has therefore migrated to the forefront of theological discussion because of the inherent import of its content *and* because a deeper sense of ecclesial identity is critical for Christians to speak meaningfully on any topic among themselves and in proclaiming the gospel to the world.

The work of advancing ecclesial self-understanding and evangelization requires critical dialogue between ecclesiology and missiology. These two theological fields have much to learn from mutual engagement, yet they do not always create space for their scholars and practitioners to share theories and experiences. This study provides a survey of the discipline of ecclesiology with an eye towards how it might learn from scholars and practitioners of mission and how it might also inform their work. It begins by defining some of the goals, methods and boundaries of the field of ecclesiology. It then considers three issues at the forefront of ecclesiological work today: 1) questions emanating from the ecumenical sphere; 2) shifting demographics within Christianity and corresponding calls for new ecclesial structures, and 3) the necessity of a more robust engagement between ecclesiology and the social sciences. Finally, the concluding section offers some reflections about how the current state of ecclesiology might provide glimpses of the future of ecclesiology and what light it might shine on the future of missiology.

Ecclesiology as a Discipline

Ecclesiology proceeds from the conviction that the church, like other theological realities, is a mystery. This identity is affirmed in the first chapter of Vatican II's Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen gentium* entitled "The Mystery of the Church" which frames its presentation of the church

not in terms of institutional elements or visible structures, but in light of its reality as a mystery of inexhaustible depth. The church is the “universal sacrament of salvation” (LG 48; AG 1), a reality “imbued with the hidden presence of God” (2004: 7).² Ecclesiology engages its study of the church with an understanding that its goal is not to fully capture or exhaust this mystery, but to give it deeper and more adequate expression. Thus, while ecclesiologists dedicate themselves to studying the church, they do so with a recognition that the church itself is not of ultimate importance (2004: 7). The church seeks to be transparent to Christ; when it focuses on itself and its structures, engaging in what Pope Francis calls “navel gazing,” it ceases to be the church in certain critical ways. In their excellent book *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today* Stephen B. Bevans and Roger P. Schroeder highlight this element of the church’s identity noting that “The point of the church is rather to point beyond itself, to be a community that preaches, serves and witnesses to the reign of God. In doing this the church shares in and continues, through the power of God’s Spirit, the work of its Lord, Jesus Christ” (2004: 7). Ecclesiology’s commitment to emphasize the church’s mysterious and sacramental character underscores the reality that the church, as sign, always refers believers to a reality beyond its visible elements.

Another key starting point for ecclesiology is that the church is “missionary by its very nature” (AG 2). This identity has been constitutive of the church from its beginnings. The sending of the apostles and the outreach of the community in Acts are clear examples that since the very origins of the Christian community “to say church is to say mission” (Bevans and Schroeder, 2004: 7). However, the centrality of mission in the church’s life has been affirmed with renewed intensity in the last fifty years. In addition to the strong affirmations of the church as inherently missionary at Vatican II, Pope Paul VI communicated this conviction in his apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi* when he identified the act of evangelization as the church’s “deepest identity” (EN 14). Similarly, Pope John Paul II in his 1990 encyclical *Redemptoris Missio* wrote that missionary activity “belongs to the very nature of the Christian life” (RM 1). Bevans and Schroeder (2004: 7-8) illumine the church’s missionary character by bringing together several critical voices:

Therefore it is the process of evangelization that is the *raison d'être* of the church. Adrian Hastings has written how the church does not so much *have* a mission – as if the church somehow existed *prior* to its task – rather it *is* mission as such, indeed, as the phrase goes, the church of Christ does not so much have a mission as the mission of Christ has a church. Perhaps, most memorable of all, theologian Emil Brunner is often quoted as saying ‘the Church exists by mission, just as a fire exists by burning.’

Because the church exists to advance the mission of Christ, its interests are co-extensive with efforts to build up the Kingdom of God. This means that defining ecclesiology’s subject matter is a difficult task as its boundaries are less clear than that of other theological disciplines. The breadth of ecclesiology’s concerns means that it is necessarily a collaborative endeavor which draws on multiple theological fields including church history, biblical studies, Christology, theological anthropology and ethics.

The narrative structure of ecclesiology also shapes the focus and scope of this discipline.

Because the church is a mystery that resists finite expressions as well as a dynamic reality animated by mission, ecclesiology does not limit itself to doctrinal formulations. It endeavors to tell the story of God’s on-going saving work made manifest in Jesus Christ and the experience the community gathered in response to this good news. Its story is not a reductive, idealized account of an imagined church which does not exist; nor is it a collection of fragmentary accounts of lived experiences with no sense of their connection to fundamental theological themes or to the unfolding of salvation history. Instead, ecclesiology narrates a story that offers systematic understanding of the church which integrates its many diverse aspects within a comprehensive framework while resisting the oversimplification of the “messiness of history” and the concrete realities of a diverse community of faith. Often in the past, the story of the church has been told as a singular account narrated from the perspective of the privileged and the powerful. In recent years, ecclesialogists have committed themselves to listening to voices which disrupt the dominant narrative and call for a historical, methodological and thematic reimagining of their field.

In a recent book that has become influential in the field of ecclesiology, *Re-Visioning the Church: An Experiment in Systematic-Historical Ecclesiology*, Australian theologian, Neil Ormerod, brings further

precision to the task of ecclesiology by identifying five identity markers for this field (Ormerod, 2014). Ormerod insists that ecclesiology must be *empirical/historical, critical, normative, pastoral and dialectical*. Understanding the importance of each of these commitments -- and the productive tensions between them -- is essential to appreciating the complex reality of this discipline. First, ecclesiology has to be *empirically* grounded. It must provide a history of the church that relies on solid research, proven historical methods and empirical data. It must ensure that the information it presents about the church's life is accurate and conforms to the rigorous standards of historical inquiry. Ecclesiology also has to be *critical*. In presenting the story of the church, ecclesiologists must take the historical evidence seriously while also making critical judgments that account for the presence of biases, blind spots and agendas that influence particular presentations of the church and the forces impacting the Christian community. Ecclesiology shares these first two identity markers -- the desire to be *empirical* and *critical* -- with the field of church history in that both disciplines utilize these criteria in their efforts to give an authentic account of key developments in the church's life.

Yet, ecclesiology is decidedly different than church history. It is not merely an *empirical* and *critical* study of historical events. It also has a *normative* function, spelling out "not just how the church actually is but how it should be, at least in the mind of the theologian" (Ormerod, 2014: 5). Ecclesiology does not merely report the church's story and its events; it also shapes the ecclesial reality in an on-going way. A primary goal of ecclesiology is to consider the ways in which the church has advanced, or failed to advance, its central aim: continuing Jesus' mission of building up the kingdom of God (Ormerod, 2014: 7). The fact that ecclesiology has a normative role means that it "must judge whether this change -- this new structure, teaching or program -- contributes to the purpose of the church. It does so by asking whether this change, structure, teaching or program is properly oriented to the goal of the church: the incremental realization of the kingdom" (Ormerod, 2014: 8). It is critical to underscore that ecclesiology does not evaluate the church in relation to its mission as if these were two distinct and separable realities that could be compared side by side. The church is transformed by its very efforts to transform the world

according to the demands of the kingdom (Ormerod, 2014: 259-60). Thus, while the normative role of ecclesiology provides standards for evaluating the church's life, these standards are not static nor can they be separated from the church's life such that they can be examined by the Christian community from a critical distance. Ultimately, it is this normative dimension -- seeing the church in relation to its origin and its telos -- that gives ecclesiology its "theological depth" guaranteeing that it is not reduced to simply being a critical history of the church (Ormerod, 2014: 7).

Ecclesiology must also be *practical*. Its task lies not just in evaluating the Christian community in relation to its eschatological end, but in suggesting practical, pastoral strategies to lead the community closer to that reality. According to Ormerod, "just as social analysis leads to social policy, so too ecclesiology will have its practical ramifications" (2014: 9). The fact that the church must always be seen in relation to its mission and, as such, must be seen as on a journey and in motion, means that ecclesiology must pay special attention to the church's actions and whether they bring it closer to its goal or miss the mark. As such, ecclesiology concerns itself not only with ideas but with the actual life of the church and the pastoral leadership needed to foster dynamic faith and discipleship. In the same way that Gustavo Gutierrez (1996: 24) warns that theology cannot be defined as "faith seeking understanding" because its goal is not that the People of God merely "understand" certain theological realities, ecclesiology must have a practical/pastoral dimension because its aim is not merely the studying the church, but helping it to usher in the kingdom.

Finally, ecclesiology must be *dialectical* because it must hold these many commitments in tension with one another and view its success in maintaining any one of them in light of its success in maintaining the others. It is the dialectical relationship of these commitments that helps illumine the authentic nature of the church as simultaneously a mystery and a concrete human reality.

The State of Ecclesiology Today

Ecclesiology today has a wide variety of questions, goals and research trajectories. A common theme among them is a genuine optimism that despite challenges, the church can speak meaningfully to this moment in history. The church cannot wait for the right moment to spread the gospel; it is missioned to spread the gospel in every era. The church is called to look to each age, despite its challenges, for the opportunities it brings to know Christ more deeply and proclaim the good news more effectively. Thus, to advance its mission of continuing Jesus' mission, the church must engage the lived reality of the world and respond to its specific needs and concerns. Theology, and especially ecclesiology, cannot afford to be, as Gutierrez (1996: 34) has said, the "caboose of the present." Thus, ecclesiology must constantly ask: "How can the present moment help the church understand itself more deeply and what opportunities does it provide to advance Christ's mission?" Three realities of the present moment provide chances for ecclesiology to deepen understandings of the church and advance Christ's mission in significant ways: 1) advances in ecumenical dialogue; 2) shifting demographics and corresponding questions regarding ecclesial structure; and 3) the use of the social sciences as a tool for deepening the church's self-understanding.

Questions Posed by Ecumenical Dialogue: Looking for Holes in the Roof

A critical task for ecclesiology today is to find new paths forward for long-standing ecumenical challenges. While there are many areas of ecumenical exchange that impinge on ecclesiology, recent conversations regarding the ministry of *episcopé* serve as one example of how the quest for Christian unity surfaces theological questions and methodological issues that ecclesiology cannot ignore. For years, ecumenical dialogue was stalled over issues of authority and, in particular, over divergences regarding the role of bishops or the legitimacy of the episcopal office. For a long time, it seemed that the question of whether two communities agreed about the office of bishop served as a litmus test for their ability to engage in meaningful dialogue. In recent years, participants in ecumenical dialogue have been able to find a new and valuable starting point for conversations about authority, namely the ministry of

episcopé. While not all Christian communities accept the authority of an individual bishop, there is a general consensus among Christians that Christ exercised a ministry of oversight to promote the gifts of the Spirit and unite his followers within one body (cf. Mt 28:18 and Jn 20:22) (WCC 2013: 48). There is also agreement that Jesus made his apostles successors in this ministry who exercised authority in the proclamation of the gospel, the celebration of the sacraments, particularly in the Eucharist, and the pastoral guidance of believers (WCC 2013: 48). While consensus regarding a biblically-based ministry of *episcopé* represents a significant advance for Christians, disagreement remains regarding the proper practice of this ministry. In particular, questions over the personal, collegial and communal character of *episcopé* often bring conversations among Christians to a seeming impasse.

The shift from the dead end question of bishops or no bishops to considering shared understandings and differences regarding the ministry of *episcopé* has created space for growth in ecumenical agreement. Many ecclesialologists seeking to support ecumenical work have sought means of utilizing this opening by trying to create new ways of thinking about authority and ecclesial structures. In the past, many ecclesialologists assumed that unity among Christians required univocal statements of faith and shared ecclesial structures. More and more, ecclesiology is recognizing affirmations of differentiated consensus as a means to the shared communion it seeks; it is drawing a helpful distinction between form and substance. As Anna Case-Winters (2006: 31) of McCormick Theological Seminary notes: “If we recognize the substance in one another, need the forms be church dividing? In the quest for unity, should the differences be blessed, or should they be brought into greater conformity with one another?”

Affirming a shared understanding of *episcopé* does not require that every community must look alike and exercise the ministry in the same way. This view recognizes that diversity among us is not necessarily a threat or a sign of division but is, perhaps, a manifestation of the Spirit’s presence among us. Also important is that the ecumenical movement is helping ecclesialologists see the rich possibilities of taking the church’s pastoral, practical life as a starting point rather than always beginning with particular elements of polity or doctrine. Ecclesialologists are learning that while ecclesiology has to be empirical,

critical, normative and practical—the practical does not always have to come last. In other words, the practical realities of the church must sometimes be an engine rather than a caboose.

In the second chapter of Mark's gospel, a group of men bring Jesus a paralyzed man for healing. However, when they arrive at the place where Jesus is, they cannot reach him because the crowds are already too great and their way is blocked. Mark's gospel notes that "Being unable to get to him because of the crowd, they removed the roof above him; and when they had dug an opening, they let down the pallet where the paralytic was lying" (Mk 2:4). So, when these men encountered an obstacle to gaining access to Jesus, they created an alternate ingress. As in Mark's story, the ways to shared understandings of the church often seemed blocked by the presence of competing opinions, teachings and ways of understanding. At times, ecclesialogists can imagine only one way forward and when that path appears impassible they assume that there is no other way. Often, however, the answer is not to keep trying to push through ways that seem blocked, but to create another way in. The ecumenical movement is pushing ecclesiology to create holes in the roof – to find new methods for thinking about old problems. The fruit of ecumenical dialogue offers new dimensions to ecclesiological work by illumining ways that shared understandings of ministry, sacraments, and social justice can provide fresh insights and new entry points for thinking about the ecclesial realities.

Questions about Ecclesial Structures

A second front in recent ecclesiological work is the need to rethink ecclesial structures. In order to respond to the reality of a rapidly changing, thoroughly globalized and highly technological world, the Christian community must consider what structures might be most responsive to the needs of today while being consistent with its theological commitments and the witness of tradition.³ The tectonic shifts migrating the center of gravity in Christianity to the global South will no longer allow church leaders to persist in the assumption that ecclesial structures can remain the same. Similarly, a desire for ecumenical

advance also provides an urgency for considering ecclesial structures. All of these forces demand that ecclesiologists seriously attend to what has been called the “issue under the issues” in ecclesiology – namely the relationship between the center and the periphery. This issue is a perennial one, but has acquired new layers of complexity as centers in Christianity are shifting as never before while the distinction between what constitutes the center and what constitutes the periphery is no longer clear.

The question of the relationship between center and the periphery is at the heart of Francis’ papacy. Many of the pope’s statements and, perhaps even more importantly, his actions and gestures have demonstrated that rethinking the church’s structure -- and, in particular, the role of the papacy -- is a priority of his pontificate. This focus is not surprising for a papacy that began as the result of the first papal resignation in many centuries, a move which, in itself, raised important questions about the role of the pope and the connection between the person of the pope and the papal office. Francis has communicated a commitment to structural reform through explicit calls for conversation on this topic as well as through gestures such as his persistent references to himself as the bishop of Rome, the simplicity he has brought to the papal office and his choice of Italian for almost all of his communications. From the beginning of his papacy, Francis has called for a synodal church. The word “synod” comes from the Greek, *synodos*, which can literally be rendered as “travelling on a journey together.” In essence, the pope is calling for a renewal in the way that the universal church is governed such that the local church -- in particular dioceses and bishops conferences – play a more dynamic role in the governance of the universal church. True to his style, Francis does not rely on technical formulations for describing his vision of renewed ecclesial structures. He uses accessible language speaking of a church that listens, learns and shares mission. He notes (2015) that a synodal church is “a church which listens, which realizes that listening is more than simply hearing. It is a mutual listening in which everyone has something to learn. The faithful people, the college of bishops, the Bishop of Rome: all listening to each other, and all listening to the Holy Spirit, the ‘Spirit of truth,’ in order to know what he ‘says to the Churches’ (Rev 2:7).”

Francis is careful to assert that becoming a listening church does not mean that the current church just “starts listening.” Taking on such an identity requires the development of ecclesial structures which decrease the distance between center and periphery, allowing the church greater access to a wide variety of voices, promoting enhanced communication among all of the faithful and providing a deepened appreciation of the context necessary for appreciating what is being heard. Becoming a listening church also means that the center does not do all the talking. Francis has been reticent to speak on issues such as the shortage of priests and certain moral matters, not because he has little interest in these concerns, but out of a sense that it is the local churches that should raise these issues and suggest a path forward. Francis makes this point in *Evangelii gaudium* stating that he does not believe that:

[T]hat the papal magisterium should be expected to offer a definitive or complete word on every question which effects the church and the world. It is not advisable for the pope to take the place of local bishops in the discernment of every issue which arises in their territory. In this sense, I am conscious of the need to promote a sound ‘decentralization’ (EG 16).

This, insiders agree, is an attempt by the pope to restore the responsibility of teaching, and the authority to teach, to the local bishops. An important example of this is seen in Francis’ recent motu proprio *Magnum Principium* which gives greater responsibility to local bishops for making decisions about appropriate translations of the Mass and thus reversing a trend in which the Vatican was largely in charge of such determinations.

Also revealing is Francis’ appointment of cardinals. He recently announced his selection of five new cardinals from El Salvador, Mali, Sweden, Laos and Spain. None of these countries, except Spain, has previously had a cardinalate. In Laos, Catholics are a small minority; the 46,000 faithful represent less than 1% of the population. There are no Catholic dioceses in Laos, and there are 67 parishes served by 17 priests. A recent study showed that Laos currently has 20 seminarians and 93 religious sisters. Many expected Francis’ announcement to include new cardinals for the archdioceses of Los Angeles and Philadelphia given that each has historically had a cardinal eligible to vote in a papal conclave, but neither does at present. Together these archdioceses have 5.6 million Catholics which is more than 100 times the

number of Catholics in Laos. The fact that the pope did not appoint cardinals from areas where the Catholic Church is rich, powerful or populous but instead elevated men from diverse parts of the world shows Francis' desire to look to the peripheries and bring them to the center. The diversity of these appointments is meant to reflect the true catholicity of the church diffused throughout the world and to provide the pope with witnesses from throughout the whole church who might aid him in his role as shepherd of the Universal Church.

In light of Francis' actions and the dramatically shifting demographics in the Catholic Church, a central discussion among Catholic ecclesiologists is the possibility that the church might move from having a center and a periphery to having many centers. Some wonder if Pope Francis has already previewed his vision for a new ecclesial structure with his creation of a consultative body of nine cardinals representing each of the continents, who are tasked with considering how to reform Vatican bureaucracy to be more efficient and more representative of the world's population, imagining new ways of relating the center and periphery in the Roman Catholic Church. This, according to Francis, is not an act of modernizing but a "rebalancing act," an attempt to reform the church towards a more authentic version of its true self. One of the greatest challenges these nine cardinals will face will be to find a path for coordination between synodality and the bishop of Rome. Pope Francis (2015) himself has admitted as much acknowledging that what is needed is "the maturing of the relationship between synodality and primacy." The need to reimagine ecclesial structures and, in particular, the relationship between the center and the periphery is the hard work demanded of Christians in the present moment and it is work that we cannot turn away from. Francis (2015) asserts: "We must continue along this path. The world in which we live, and which we are called to love and serve, even with its contradictions, demands that the Church strengthen cooperation in all areas of her mission. It is precisely this path of synodality which God expects of the Church in the third millennium."

The Need to Engage Research and Methods from the Social Sciences

A third major thrust in ecclesiology today is a call for ecclesialogists to pay greater attention to the social sciences. If a primary goal of ecclesiology is to attend to the needs of the present moment then a key question is “how do we determine the actuality of the community at any given time?” (Hahnenberg E 2015: 167). The story of the church which ecclesiology strives to tell must steer clear of two pitfalls. On the one side it must avoid theological reductionism, that is, it cannot succumb to the danger of working with the “idea of the church” rather than the church as it is historically and empirically given. Such an approach runs the risk of falling into oversimplifications and totalizing metanarratives which yield static, romanticized notions of the church rather than engaging in the realities and messiness of history. Similarly, ecclesiology cannot give way to a fear that any effort to provide empirical descriptions of the church’s life involves the hazard of reducing mysteries to solvable problems. On the other side, ecclesiology must avoid the danger of sociological reductionism which engages in empirical research on the church that deals with only its outer appearances and does not attend to its theological meaning. It must avoid approaches to the church which see the Christian community as a purely human institution and not one that “lives in and by the power of Christ and the Holy Spirit as the source of the transcendent energy that brought it into being and sustains its life” (Ormerod: 2014: 13). The need to overcome the dangers of either of these extremes is articulated by Christian B Scharen (Ward P 2012: 4) of Luther Seminary who asserts “What is needed today is a rapprochement between historical and theological understandings of the church in a way that the actual life of the church is attended to, thought through theologically, and thereby strengthened for a more faithful witness.”

The social sciences offer the possibility of providing a “thick description” of the contemporary experience of the church. However, despite its potential benefits, ecclesialogists have generally been slow to incorporate the research and methods of the social sciences into their work. Peter Ward (2012: 4) in his important book *Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography* critiqued ecclesialogists by noting that “[i]t has become acceptable to make assertions where there is no evidence. We assume a common perception of contemporary church life between author and reader. We base whole arguments on

anecdote and the selective treatment of experience. We are prone to a slight of hand that makes social theory appear to be a description of social reality – which of course it is not.” He laments a “methodological laziness” among ecclesialogists who fail to lay out a method for determining what “the experience” actually is. Theologian Edward Hahnenberg (2015: 166) of John Carroll University observes a distinction between how theologians employ historical methods and their use of the social sciences. He notes that when theologians appeal to history “in the construction of our theologies, we abide by the disciplinary conventions, academic rigor, and hermeneutical sensitivity demanded by the historian.” Yet, when theologians seek to describe the contemporary experience of the church, “completely different rules seem to apply” (2015: 166).

Ecclesiology today seeks to address the problem of “different rules.” Engaging the social sciences is critical because it pushes below the ideas to the actual practices of ministry and the lived experience of the church. While such work is incredibly slow and painstaking, Hahnenberg (2015: 177) notes that such engagement “sparks theological insight. It gives birth to new ideas or different ways of looking at old ideas. The concrete becomes creative, usually through the unexpected, the anomalous, the distinctive voice in all its messy particularity. What does not fit within our present theologies is what inspires future theological development.” Many ecclesialogists today are working to integrate empirical perspectives into their work recognizing that such perspectives belong in a “listening church.” Again, Hahnenberg (2015: 177-8) is instructive on this point noting that “by entering into a particular local community, the theologian learns with that community and with its ministers – not so that *she can speak for them*, but so that she might learn how *to speak for herself with them*, having been cultivated in the practical wisdom that the community and its ministers already enact. Through her research, the theologian develops the experience, insight, and virtue necessary to make wise theological judgments – judgements rooted in the community and accountable to the community.” Engagement with the social sciences is changing the way ecclesialogists approach their questions and the types of questions that they ask. It is challenging their assumptions and, in exciting ways, illuminating new paths forward.

Conclusion

Theology stands at a moment which requires significant listening and creative re-imagining given the advent of historic developments in the theological, ecumenical, scientific and social spheres. In a time of dramatic change and constant flux it is important for theology to find the space and self-possession to attune itself to the Spirit so that it might speak meaningfully in the world today. As we have seen, much is being done in the field of ecclesiology so that the church might know itself more deeply and advance its mission of continuing Christ's mission in the present context. The questions that remain are two-fold. First, one must ask what does the state of ecclesiology today say about the future of ecclesiology and, perhaps, the future of theology, in general? Second, one must explore what light do the advances in ecclesiology shed on missiology's efforts to achieve its own aims? Starting with the first point, what does this study say about ecclesiology and theology in the future? It says that the boundaries of theology will be even more fuzzy than they are now. It says that all fields of theology will have to include many dialogue partners – people from every corner of the church, other religions, other theological disciplines and disciplines considered to be outside the church. It says that theological work will be harder inasmuch as it must always be collaborative. It means that theologians will have to gain some facility with, if not mastery of, skills and concepts outside of their particular area of expertise and outside of the theological discipline. It says that even with all of the new competencies required of theologians, they will not be able to leave complicated perennial questions behind. The three ecclesiological fronts examined above suggest that ecclesiology will have to be more ecumenical, more local and more attuned to lived realities. Another broad takeaway is that ecclesiology must constantly change and adapt. The change that ecclesialogists foresee and work towards -- a change that manifests itself in new ecumenical relationships, new ecclesial structures and new partnerships with the social sciences -- is not a change that comes from the top down, as change in the church has often happened. These changes that emerge from the margins and from the lived experience of the faithful. This future seems simultaneously daunting and exhilarating. One thing is clear, being an ecclesialogist today is not for the faint of heart.

Turning now to the specific relationship between advances in ecclesiology and missiology. The purpose here is not to tell missiologists the significance of ecclesiological advances for their work; missiologists know best what the implications and potential benefits might be. Instead, the purpose is to offer a few points of reflection regarding the insights that can be glimpsed by considering ecclesiology and missiology in light of one another. First, many of the points named above regarding the future of ecclesiology seem to apply to missiology. Missiology in the future will have less distinct boundaries, will have to be more interdisciplinary, engage in more dialogue with more diverse partners, will have to be collaborative, and will have to constantly change and adapt. Second, missiology should consider and reconsider its own goals, boundaries and methods. Establishing goals, boundaries and methods is an important part of a field's beginnings and is often associated with beginners. Knowing and reflecting upon these features within a particular field is usually the work of someone entering a discipline, not the work of experts. However, what ecclesiologists have learned in recent years is that pushing ourselves to think about and name our boundaries, goals, questions and methods has yielded amazing fruit. Describing ecclesiology as *empirical, critical, normative, dialectical* and *pastoral* has forced our discipline, which has often hidden behind the excuse of "too big to explain," to come to grips with its task and create greater unity among those working in this field.

Today the connection between ecclesiology and missiology is more important than ever – and I would add ecumenism into this dynamic. The World Council of Churches' text *The Church towards a Common Vision* asserts in its opening chapter that "the Church is essentially missionary, and unity is essentially related to mission" (WCC 2013: 1). This statement shows the inherent connection between three key elements at the heart of Christianity– church, mission and unity. For the church to advance its mission of advancing Christ's mission it must provide a compelling witness to the truth of the gospel and the joy that it brings. Few things undermine the credibility of the Christian message and mission more than the various divisions among Christians. The success of the church's mission requires an ecumenical imperative to address the major divisions within Christianity with urgency as well as charity. It is only by

attending to this ecumenical imperative that the inherently missionary church will come to know itself more deeply and be able to spread the gospel more effectively.

To meet the needs of the present moment and to move confidently into the future, missiology and ecclesiology must practice a commitment to constant dialogue. Theology is symphonic in nature so that advances in one theological realm hold tremendous potential to inspire advances in others. This is true of all areas of theology, but it is especially true of ecclesiology and missiology since their goals and methods are inherently related. More space needs to be created for missiologists, ecclesiologists and practitioners to converse about their experience of the church today and hope for its future. It is only by working together that we can move forward in our shared work of preaching, serving and witnessing to the reign of God.

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¹ An outline of the emergence and history of ecclesiology can be found in Wofhart Pannenberg’s *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 3:21-27. Pannenberg notes that the first separate treatments of the church can in the fifteenth century with Johann of Ragusa’s *Tractatus de Ecclesia* (1433) and John of Torquemada’s *Summa de Ecclesia* (1453). It is interesting to see how the consciousness for the need of a separate ecclesiology emerged. For example, the first edition of Melanchthon’s *Loci* (1521) does not treat the church as a separate theme, but the later 1535 edition inserts a section *De Ecclesia* which considers the statements in the Augsburg Confession on the church. Similarly, in John Calvin’s Institutes the second edition (1539) contains a treatment of ecclesiology which does not exist in the first edition (1536). The third edition (1559) contains an even more expansive treatment of this theme. Questions regarding the church – especially its juridical nature (who is the church, where is the church, what constitutes the church) are natural outcomes of questions connected to the Reformation.

² This discussion of the church as a mystery and as inherently missionary draws heavily on the work of Bevans and Schroeder in the excellent work *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today*. Many of the quotes here are drawn from that text.

³ Many excellent studies have been written about the changing demographics in Christianity. One particularly interesting study of this phenomena and its impact on the Catholic Church is John Allen’s *The Future Church: How Ten Trends are Revolutionizing the Catholic Church* (New York: Image, 2012).