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Learning to See Those Who Suffer
The Community of Practice and the Construction of Knowledge
in a Ministry of Encounter and Care
Abstract

This paper attests to the devastating isolation that suffering effects and argues for a Christian response manifested in a ministry of encounter and care situated in the local church. Ministry to marginalized, suffering people is a multifaceted, interpersonal endeavor that simultaneously comprises an essential dimension of the universal church’s mission; this paper proposes that a ministry of caring encounter functions most effectively when undertaken by Christians in the local church working together to recognize and dynamically respond to the particular instances of suffering present in their midst.

Drawing on social learning theory, the paper conceptualizes each local expression of a ministry of encounter and care as a community of practice whose members together construct the formative knowledge upon which their praxis depends, particularly through the key practice of theological reflection anchoring their joint work. Through their shared enterprise of discernment and active care, individuals in this community of practice: (1) cultivate their abilities to see those whom suffering renders nearly invisible, (2) develop together a richer and more fulsome praxis of encounter and care than they could as individuals, and (3) strengthen their Christian identities.
Look at my right hand and see –
there is no one who takes notice of me;
no refuge remains to me;
no one cares for me.
-Psalm 142:4, NRSV

The psalmist’s ancient cry attests to humankind’s ever-present vulnerability to suffering and the loneliness it fosters. For thousands of years, the lament has retained its power and resonance because the pain of tragedy, trauma, loss, illness, chronic distress, and grief are woven into the experience of being human. Suffering recognizes no boundaries; it visits its devastating effects upon people in every age and circumstance.

When it strikes, suffering can, and often does, imprison people in loneliness and isolation. Sometimes it is the wounded one who avoids others, lacking the energy and strength to participate in relationship, bereft of the hope that encounter might offer succor. Sometimes the suffering one bears the brunt of others’ inattention. Stigma, fear, ignorance, embarrassment, and even misguided attempts at sensitivity can introduce distance, marginalization, and exclusion into the daily experiences of people already enduring anguish and adversity.

As Christians, we have been called for nearly two millennia to seek out those who suffer. We are enjoined by Jesus to “Go out at once into the streets and lanes of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame” (Lk 14:21) who dwell at the edge of society in their misfortune. Jesus’s mandate remains as challenging today as it was during his earthly lifetime because the experience of suffering continues to sow withdrawal, discomfort, awkwardness, and rejection and to disrupt relationships as it alters the landscapes of people’s lives.

In our own time, Pope Francis exhorts the church to heed Jesus’s directive. He reminds Christ’s disciples in the twenty-first century of their responsibility to fight the isolation suffering engenders by deliberately pursuing connection with those enduring anguish. “In order for this to happen, it is necessary to go out: out from the churches and the parishes, to go outside and look for people where they live, where they suffer, and where they hope.”¹ Pope Francis urges the construction of a “culture of encounter”² that consists of “not just seeing, but looking; not just hearing, but listening, not just passing people by, but stopping with them; not just saying, ‘what a shame, poor people!’ but allowing yourself to be moved with compassion; ‘and then to draw near, to touch and to say: “Do not weep”’ and to give at least a drop of life.”³ To create a culture of encounter that intentionally reaches out so personally and tangibly to suffering people is both urgent need and formidable task – one that Christians are called to as an expression of individual discipleship and also as a manifestation of the local faith community’s participation in

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the mission of the universal church. Given its highly relational character, it is a work whose dimensions can be learned best by Christians working together at the local level in the practice of encounter itself.

**Social Learning Theory – Constructing Knowledge, Building the Culture of Encounter**

*The Culture of Encounter and the Practice of Theological Reflection*

The faith community’s efforts to attend to people who, in their suffering, also endure great loneliness or marginalization can be conceptualized as a new work – a shared ministry of encounter and care. As a practice of discipleship grounded in baptism, this work can be a locus for the cooperative efforts of lay volunteers and ministry professionals in the parish. It is a ministry whose key characteristics are recognition and response. Animated by the “mysticism of open eyes” that Johann Baptist Metz names as the disposition with which the church must greet suffering and embodied in praxis grounded in discernment and compassionate action, this endeavor of “going out” that Pope Francis calls for requires a secure footing within the parish in which to ground its works.

Before the faith community can respond to suffering through a ministry of care and encounter, the parishioners and ministers participating in that ministry must gather together to identify instances of suffering in their community, discern sufferers’ particular needs, seek guidance from their faith tradition, determine their ministerial resources, and plan ministerial action. Trusting in one another and their deliberate process of discernment, they can then work together to fulsomely attend to suffering people with ministering care. These twin movements of recognition and response, however, must give rise to a third movement that allows parishioners and ministers to realize what they have learned through their ministry. Moving from experiences of encounter to a place of joint reflection allows the knowledge gained in practices of care to be named, examined, refined, and finally incorporated into subsequent praxis.

This dynamic process, of (1) recognizing and naming suffering and considering together how to address it, (2) practicing encounter, and (3) drawing lessons from instances of encounter and care that in turn promote further “going out,” can be more properly understood as one of iterative praxis grounded in sustained theological reflection. As a practice, theological reflection enables the local church to flexibly identify the unique ways that suffering is manifesting in its community, to jointly discern the gifts of the Spirit and the material resources within the parish that ministers and laity alike can draw upon in their work to alleviate suffering, and to develop modes of caring encounter that will best serve the people whom they seek to aid. Theological reflection is thus a core practice around which a ministry of care and encounter can be built. It engenders not only ministerial activity, but more fundamentally, the construction of knowledge that facilitates both praxis and the formation of Christian identity.

**Theological Reflection As Situated Learning**

To understand how learning and identity formation arise for individuals who jointly participate in the ministry of care and encounter, we can employ the epistemological model of situated learning. Theorists Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger propose that a social theory of situated learning best provides the theoretical framework to analyze how knowledge is

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4 As a Catholic scholar, I situate this analysis of the local ministry of care and encounter at the level of the parish. I will employ the term local church and parish interchangeably, however, in recognition that such a ministry is well-suited to enactment by local congregations of many faith traditions.

constructed by human persons working together in a common endeavor. By examining social learning theory’s key insights, particularly as they are contextualized in communities characterized by a common practice, we can better understand how engaging in theological reflection together can allow people in a ministry of care and encounter to develop the transformative knowledge that supports their praxis and shapes their identities. With that understanding, in turn, we can discern more readily that the knowledge and identity Christians develop through participation in a ministerial community of practice can be more comprehensive and transformative than the knowledge such individuals could gain through their own personal acts of discernment and discipleship.

Social learning theory locates learning at the intersection of the individual, a particular community, and its practices. In contrast to the models of “learning as internalization” (characterized by Paulo Freire as “banking education”), this conceptualization proposes that learning must be understood as decoupled from the traditional instructional paradigm and recognized as a “dimension of social practice.” Learning is not the passive byproduct of instruction, but rather the active construction of knowledge that emerges from participation with others in joint practices. Wenger theorizes that knowledge’s telos is “the ability to experience our world and our engagement with it as meaningful.” In a ministry of care and encounter, knowing who needs care, what kind of care is possible, how the faith community can structure, initiate, and sustain care, and how the faith tradition can guide that care, is vital. Such knowledge makes possible the meaningful engagement with suffering others that ministering Christians hope to initiate. Social learning theory makes clear, however, that this knowledge cannot be taught. It is not knowledge that is received by a learner. Rather, it is developed jointly by those who participate in the ministry. Their learning arises among and between them as they work together in the tasks of theological reflection and the caring praxis that their reflection stimulates. The more robust their engagements with one another, the more robust, complex and multi-faceted their learning will be.

Communities of Practice

Lave and Wenger name the community in which actors construct knowledge the “community of practice.” It is important to note that these communities are distinguished by the actions of their members. It is their involvement with the work around which the community is centered that makes a community one of practice and not of simple camaraderie. To belong to the community of practice in any capacity, Lave and Wenger explain, “implies participation in an activity system about which participants share understanding concerning what they are doing and what that means in their lives and for their communities.” Conceptualizing those members of the parish who participate in the ministry of encounter and care as a community of practice is a first step in understanding how the relationship between practice and learning that Wenger and

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11 Wenger, *Communities of Practice*, 4.
Lave emphasize is operative within the ministering community as it engages in theological reflection and ensuing works of care.

Communities of practice, irrespective of their practices’ particularities, share three features. Each one is characterized by the mutual engagement of its members, a joint enterprise, and a shared repertoire. These three attributes attest to practice’s prominence in the community’s ethos, and together they demonstrate how practice functions as “a source of coherence in the community.”

Understanding each element’s particular contribution to the community of practice can allow us to develop a fuller appreciation of the features a nascent ministry of care and encounter must develop in order for it to function as a true community of practice.

**Mutual Engagement:**

Mutual engagement describes participants’ commitment and contributions to the community’s practice. It encompasses “not only our competence but also the competence of others. It draws on what we do and what we know as well as on our ability to connect meaningfully to what we don’t do and what we don’t know — that is, to the contributions and knowledge of others.” Participation need not be identical across the community. In any community of practice, there can be newcomers, old-timers, people whose efforts make “complementary contributions,” people who bring “overlapping forms of competence,” people whose engagement can be described as full participation, and still others whose efforts are legitimately peripheral. Expressions of mutual engagement may vary in form, but in any community of practice, it is demonstrated by and recognized in all participants to some degree. In the specific instance of a ministry of care and encounter, mutual engagement is expressed by members’ willing involvement in each of the three movements of the ministry’s praxis. Through their interactions with one another, with the tasks particular to each movement, and with the suffering people whom the ministry encounters and cares for, each member actively contributes to and learns from the practices central to the ministerial community.

**Joint Enterprise:**

Joint enterprise names the primary endeavor of the community and the “sense of ownership” that participants feel toward it. A social theory of learning reminds us that practices are processes and, as such, “come to life” only when performed by the members of the community. It is in enacting the practices that make their endeavor manifest that participants recognize the enterprise of the community as their own. While each person may not perform identical practices, the members of the community influence their enterprise as they perform their works situated within the larger context of the community itself. It is important to note that the level of autonomy with which the group functions can be significant or limited, affording greater or smaller opportunity to participants to alter the community’s enterprise. Despite that variation, for a community to be a community of practice, members must somehow recognize their own and one another’s works as valued contributions to their group’s joint endeavor. This joint enterprise, Wenger notes, “is defined by the participants in the very process of pursuing it. It is their negotiated response to their situation and thus belongs to them in a profound sense, in spite of all the forces and influences that are beyond their control.”

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14 Wenger, *Communities of Practice*, 49.
15 Wenger, *Communities of Practice*, 76.
16 Wenger, *Communities of Practice*, 76.
17 Wenger, *Communities of Practice*, 100.
18 Wenger, *Communities of Practice*, 77.
parish’s ministry of care and encounter, such ongoing naming of and commitment to the ministry’s contours is a fundamental work.

Shared Repertoire:
Shared repertoire describes the specific resources the community uses to carry out its practice. It “includes routines, words, tools, ways of doing things, stories, gestures, symbols, genres, actions, or concepts that the community has produced or adopted in the course of its existence.”

Attaining competence in manipulating the elements of the shared repertoire to perform the practice of the community is a central task for each member. The process of theological reflection, along with the practices of prayer and discernment and the scriptural and doctrinal texts ministry participants employ when they undertake theological reflection, comprise key elements of the shared repertoire of a ministry of care and encounter.

Learning in the Community of Practice

Conceptualizing learning as a social process makes clear that knowledge as it is constructed in the community of practice has two dimensions: “the production, transformation, and change in the identities of persons [and] knowledgeable skill in practice.” Participants develop the skills needed to use the community’s repertoire of artifacts, tools, language, and concepts, but they also develop their identities as people who, through their participation in the community of practice, engage with the world in new ways.

Recognizing the community of practice’s formative influence on identity is particularly important for those seeking to establish new communities of practice. Wenger cautions, “Communities of practice should not be introduced to purely instrumental purposes. They are about knowing, but also about being together, living meaningfully, developing a satisfying identity, and altogether being human.”

The identity developed through one’s affiliation with the community perdures beyond the moments in which one is engaged in active practice; “as a constituent of meaning, participation is broader than mere engagement in practice…. It is part of who they are that they always carry with them.”

By participating in the situated learning that occurs in the community of practice, participants acquire the discernable ability and identity of practitioners. By participating in the learning that is constructed in the community of practice devoted to encounter and care, participants’ abilities to see and embrace those who suffer is developed and their identity as Christians who cultivate the eyes to look with compassion upon suffering, lonely, and neglected people as an expression of discipleship is forged.

Communities of Practice, Communities of Discipleship

Adopting the community of practice framework enables us to analyze more closely the situated learning inherent to ministry in the local church. Jane Regan, practical theologian and scholar of religious education, explains that the particular identity and competency that communities of practice at the parish level foster are those of Christian discipleship and increasingly skilled participation in the universal church’s mission of evangelization. Regan writes, “it is our relationship with Jesus, our commitment to the community of faith, and our capacity to participate in the mission of the church – that is, our life of faith – that is fostered and...

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19 Wenger, Communities of Practice, 83.
20 Wenger, Communities of Practice, 47.
21 Wenger, Communities of Practice, 124.
22 Wenger, Communities of Practice, 57.
enhanced by our connectivity with smaller groups within the parish.”

Although the ministries extant in any given parish may exhibit considerable variety, from the choir to the youth group to the food pantry to the finance council, when conceptualized as communities of practice characterized by mutual engagement, a joint enterprise, and a shared repertoire, each ministry becomes the site in which Christians manifest their faith and more deeply come to know it.

Understanding the works of the parish’s ministry as practices and the people in each ministry as communities of practice allows ministry professionals and laity to conceptualize the dimensions of their work theoretically. The community of practice framework thus enables the parish to develop well-articulated, multi-valent, dynamic, and purposeful ministries. That ability is particularly important for the construction of new expressions of mission, such as the ministry of encounter and care.

The Four Marks of a Discipling Community of Practice

Regan identifies four traits of ministries that function ably as communities of practice. Hospitality, conversation, followership, and discernment mark ministries that authentically demonstrate and develop participants’ faith and foster their participation in the universal mission of the church.

Hospitality:
Hospitality characterizes the orientation of the community of practice. Pointing to the scriptural account of the Judgment of Nations (Mt 25:31-46), in which Jesus teaches that recognizing and attending to the needs of suffering people will be the metric by which the “sheep” are separated from the “goats,” Regan makes clear that hospitality is the very “foundation on which the Christian is judged.” This disposition, expressed in the community’s acts of welcome and care, attends carefully to context. Hospitable communities of practice not only greet those with whom they interact in a gracious and loving way, they foster inclusivity that extends to the excluded and the marginalized in their parishes and communities. Undoubtedly, hospitality must be a hallmark of the community of practice charged with encountering lonely, marginalized, isolated, suffering people and attending to them with loving kindness.

Conversation:
Conversation describes the manner of engagement between the community’s participants. Regan defines conversation as the “sustained, engaged, and critical interchange between two or more people constituted by active listening and respectful dialogue.” It is through conversation that the members of the community of practice will name its purposes, question its assumptions, propose new directions, challenge one another, gather information, plan, and interact with the world beyond its borders. Gathering those activities within a frame of conversation anchors the relationships of the members of the community ad intra and ad extra to a Christian disposition of humility, compassion, and respect. Moreover, Regan notes, “providing the time and the context for meaningful conversation sets a framework within which the Spirit can work;” a necessary condition for any community of faith that seeks to cooperate with God’s grace active in the world. For the encountering, caring community of practice, the commitment to conversation as

24 Regan, Where Two or Three Are Gathered, 82.
25 Regan, Where Two or Three Are Gathered, 98.
26 Regan, Where Two or Three Are Gathered, 82.
the signature mode of interpersonal communication places the essential practice of theological reflection, for example, in a larger frame that allows the diversity, disunity, disagreement, and multiple viewpoints that inevitably arise within all groups to be expressed within the ministry without fragmenting the unity of their shared enterprise.

**Followership:**

Regan names the third characteristic of the parish community of practice “followership.”

27 She explains that although “the words follower and disciple are basically interchangeable in this context,” followership attends to the reality that in any Christian community of practice, following, rather than leading, describes the positionality of most persons within the group of disciples. Cultivating the receptive, cooperative, yet critical agency required to participate productively in the community of practice and so join in “the process of interpreting and giving life to the shared vision” is a central task of members, irrespective of the particularities of their joint enterprise or the structure of leadership within the community. In any joint lay and professional venture, questions of leadership and followership may arise. Regan’s highlighting this characteristic reinforces the qualities of openness, flexibility, and humility that every member of this cooperative enterprise must cultivate in order for the community of practice to ably seek and serve suffering people who may greet any ministerial outreach with trepidation.

**Discernment:**

If the joint enterprise and shared repertoire of a community of practice speak to what the community is doing and how its members can accomplish their work, discernment is the foundational practice the community employs to determine what members ought to do, begin, cease, resist, or cultivate. Through discernment, the community of practice collectively attends to its members, its context, its Christian tradition, its scripture, and, most significantly, to the inspiration of the Spirit. Each individual in the community of practice likewise cultivates a personal disposition toward discernment. The nimble responsiveness that the community of practice devoted to caring encounter needs to effectively perform its work only can be realized if the community is likewise devoted to allowing the sustained (and sustaining) practice of discernment to shape its praxis.

**The Ministry of Encounter and Care**

Hospitality, conversation, followership, and discernment – with these four foundational commitments guiding them in their missional endeavors, parishes can intentionally enter into the work of constructing a local manifestation of the culture of encounter and care Pope Francis so ardently champions. The persistence of suffering in our world attests to the great need for such ministry. But, what might it look like? How can ministry professionals and laity together enact a Christian praxis attuned to discerning, encountering and attending to the particular instances of suffering located in their communities? From grief and loss, to illness, injury, or addiction, to intimate partner violence, joblessness, or homelessness, trauma and pain take many shapes in contemporary life. Their instances can be so varied as to defy universalizing answers to these questions. Yet, in every community, the particular sufferings that arise there can be observed, recognized, and met with care. In naming for themselves their joint enterprise, developing their

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27 Regan, Where Two or Three Are Gathered, 109.
28 Regan, Where Two or Three Are Gathered, 117.
29 Regan, Where Two or Three Are Gathered, 128.
30 Regan, Where Two or Three Are Gathered, 138.
shared repertoire, and navigating their mutual engagement, the members of a nascent ministry of encounter and care learn together “what to do” and “how to do it” for their context. Together in conversation, guided by a commitment to cultivating the “open eyes” Metz insists upon and the discerning hearts Regan recommends, they can consider such initial questions as “what suffering plagues our community?” “who needs our care?” and “what kind of compassion and care can we offer to them?”

These questions particularly pertain to the signature practice grounding the ministry of care and encounter – the work of theological reflection. This core practice anchors the work and hence the identity of the community of practice’s members in (1) deliberate attention to God’s suffering people, (2) a Christ-like commitment to compassion, and (3) a recognition that the work of discipleship is never a solitary endeavor, but always a partaking in the communal mission of the church. With the mutually constructed knowledge that arises through their practice of theological reflection, they can then move, as followers of Christ, into ministerial works contoured by graceful hospitality – works that they anticipate can console, support, and help the struggling ones whose needs they have come to see.

A Practical Theological Method – Repertoire and Enterprise in Development

The work of theologian Richard Osmer offers parish communities of practice a model for establishing, guiding, and refining such theologically informed practice. Osmer identifies a simple sequence of four questions that can guide the theological reflection process: “What is going on?” “Why is this going on?” What ought to be going on?” and “How might we respond?” These questions help parish communities of practice accomplish the “four core tasks of practical theological interpretation: the descriptive-empirical task… the interpretive task… the normative task… [and] the pragmatic task.” In the language of situated learning, answering these questions permits the community of practice to define its enterprise, determine the boundaries of its work, identify and/or construct the elements of its shared repertoire, and evaluate its endeavor in order to continually evolve its practice. This model helpfully trains the community of practice’s awareness on its own specific context, its joint enterprise and its connection to the larger mission of the church, and on the future its members hope to move toward. It is a model that attends to imagination, action, and evaluation. The questions illustrate Wenger’s insight regarding the interconnectedness of theory and practice in the life and work of the community of practice. “Practice is not immune to the influence of theory, but neither is it a mere realization of theory, or an incomplete approximation of it. In particular, practice is not inherently unreflective.” Adopting this type of method enables the community of practice to deliberately and dialogically integrate theory and practice into seamless praxis.

Working With Others – The Constellation of Encounter

Although this analysis explores the individual community of practice, it is important to recognize that the community does not operate in isolation. As Regan explains, the parish is a larger whole constituted by many distinct communities of practice “like a constellation is made up of stars.” Inter-community engagement can enhance the work of each community of

32 Osmer, Practical Theology, Kindle.
33 Wenger, Communities of Practice, 48.
34 Regan, Where Two or Three Are Gathered, 48.
practice and allow the parish to deepen its expression of discipleship and its identity as a missioned and missional people.

Consider for example the grievous case of suicide. Regrettably, the societal stigma surrounding a suicide tragically compounds the shattering effects the victim’s death has upon surviving family members. In a ministry of encounter and care, volunteers and ministers may work to consider how they can directly support a grieving family of survivors. Working with other communities of practice, however, can amplify their expression of care. Recognizing that survivors are often avoided, the youth ministry community of practice may study how they can teach adolescents to resist excluding a peer whose family has suffered a suicide. Helping teens develop the ability to answer the question “what should I say?” empowers them to embrace, rather than avoid, a moment of encounter at school. The social justice committee may sponsor suicide awareness and prevention events, advocating for and contributing to a more just and humane society where fewer people feel driven to despair. By reaching out to other communities of practice within the parish, the ministry of care and encounter helps many people in disparate ministries work together to comprehensively manifest compassion to such suffering families and simultaneously to grow in the charity that is a signature of Christian faith.

Cultivating such “cross-boundary relationships”36 can be the work of some designated people in the community of practice. No one person need be responsible for all inter-community interaction. Additionally, the various members of the community of practice can flexibly work with different communities of practice in distinct areas. This collaboration can extend beyond the parish to the arena of interfaith work and engagement with the larger community in which the parish resides. The ministry of care and encounter, for example, may collaborate with the parish youth group, the youth groups of other faith communities, and the local school to coordinate a charity run whose proceeds might contribute to needed home renovations for a local veteran paralyzed in the course of her wartime service. In this way, a ministry of encounter and care established by people in a given parish can serve as a foundation stone for the larger culture of encounter that Pope Francis exhorts women and men of good will throughout the world to build.

Conclusion

Pain and suffering distress their victims and that distress can repel those who do not know what to say, what to do, how to help, or how to understand them. Yet, this need not be the case. “Poor and weak people can disturb us,” Jean Vanier writes, “but they can also awaken our hearts.”37 It is the task of the faith community to recognize in suffering the summons to awaken and heed the imperative to respond with a practice that offers people thirsting for human flourishing at least a consoling “drop of life.”38 While learning to do so constitutes for each individual the work of a lifetime, the learning necessary to so do arises as the community of practice’s members work with one another to construct it. Conceptualizing a parish’s ministry of care and encounter as a Christian community of practice reveals that it is through their work in that shared endeavor that Christians can best grow in the knowledge they need to ably answer

36 Regan, Where Two or Three Are Gathered, 36.
37 Amos Yong, Theology and Down Syndrome: Reimagining Disability in Late Modernity (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2007), 200.
Jesus’s call to “go out” and “bring in” (Lk. 14:21) those suffering ones who yearn for loving encounter.
Works Cited


