

Monthly Missiological Reflection #25

"From Theology to Practice: The Helix Metaphor"

Something needs to change!

Theologians are fond of denigrating strategy. One of my colleagues will speak at a leadership meeting on "What the Church Needs Most." The description of his presentation says, "What we most desperately need today is not better strategic planning or even better leadership skills--we need true saints." Obviously there is truth in this statement: Holiness *is* more important than strategy and leadership. Unsaintly leaders are dangerous strategy formulators. However, this type of statement is simplistic. Without intentional models of spiritual formation there are few "true saints."

On the other hand, practitioners frequently claim that theologians are ivory tower thinkers, unable to connect with common people. Christian Schwarz's research demonstrates that "formal theological training has a negative correlation to both church growth and overall quality of churches" (1996, 23). If Schwarz's critique is valid, the cause is likely the cultural dislocation of seminary students so that they no longer speak the language of the common people (Thielicke 1962).

Practitioners with inadequate theological formulation, however, pose one of Christianity's greatest concerns. They only partially understand the implications of the Gospel and thus teach a truncated message. This failure to critically reflect on the Word of God leads to a message shaped predominantly by their culture. Pragmatism without theological reflection threatens the future of the church.

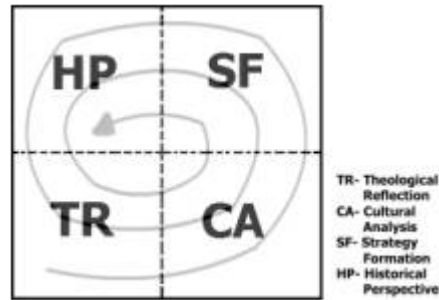
To clarify the interrelationship of theology and practice and the nature of ministry formation, I will describe what I call "The Missional Helix."

The Missional Helix

Neither theology nor strategy stands by itself as a self-contained discipline but as an ongoing process involving various elements. In defining ministry formation, image a spiral. As the coils turn round and round, they pass the same landmarks, but always at a slightly different level. This spiral, a helix, is descriptive of this process of effective ministry formation.

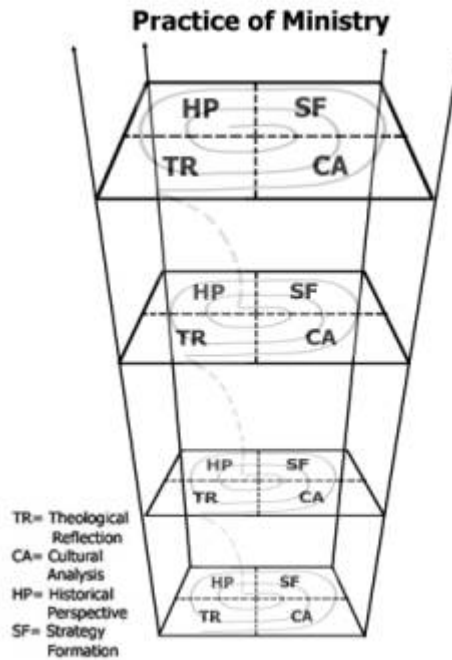
The spiral begins with **theologies**, such as *Missio Dei*, the kingdom of God, incarnation, and crucifixion, which focus and form our perspectives of culture and the practice of ministry. **Cultural analysis** forms the second element of the helix. Cultural awareness enables missionaries and ministers to define types of peoples within a cultural context, to understand the social construction of their reality, to perceive how they are socially related to one another, and to explain how the Christian message intersects with every aspect of culture (birth rites, coming of age rituals, weddings, funerals, etc). The spiral proceeds to consider what has occurred historically in the missional context. **Historical perspective** narrates how things got to be as they are based upon the interrelated stories of the particular nation, lineage, the church, and God's mission. Finally the spiral considers the **strategy**, or practice of ministry, within the missions environment.

The missional helix is a spiral because the missionary returns time and time again to reflect theologically, culturally, historically, and strategically in order to develop ministry models appropriate to the local context. Theology, social understandings, history of missions, and strategy all work together and interpenetrate each other. Thus praxis impacts theology, which in turn shapes the practice of ministry. In the following diagram the broken line between the four elements of strategy formation demonstrates how each interacts with the others.



The Relationship between the Four Elements of Ministry Formation

The diagram is a helix because theology, history, culture, and the practice of ministry **build on one another** as the community of faith collectively develops understandings and a vision of God’s will within their cultural context. Like a spring, the spiral grows to new heights as ministry understandings and experiences develop.



The Missional Helix

Each of these four elements (theology, history, culture, and strategy) is essential in reflecting on and planning for all types of Christian ministry.

Conclusion

The Missional Helix is useful in at least two ways. First and foremost, it provides a model of decision-making for the Christian practitioner that must become both intentional and instinctive. In other words, the missionary or minister should seek theological understandings, cultural analysis, historical perspective, and

strategy formation in the process of developing patterns for ministry. Second, the Missional Helix could be used as a model for theological education. Equipping for ministry should not put high emphasis on some elements and little consideration to others. Rather, it should provide an intentional, integrated model of ministry formation.

The next Monthly Missiological Reflection will apply the Missional Helix to one type of Christian ministry, that of church planting.

Sources Used

Schwarz, Christian A. 1996. *Natural Church Development*. St. Charles, IL: ChurchSmart Resources.

Thielicke, Helmut. 1962. *A Little Exercise for Young Theologians*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.