Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.” (Romans 12:1-2)

The students had only known each other for a week. The class consisted of 18 students from a variety of denominations, from multiple graduate and undergraduate schools, included a mixture of nationalities and ethnicities, with more than 30 years difference between the youngest student and the oldest. Inaugurated in 1999, this was Fuller Seminary’s 9th Youth, Family, and Culture Doctor of Ministry cohort. Each of these students had worked with young people for years. Yet, despite the diversity and vast collection of education, life and ministry experience, when the topic of the course turned to practical theology, the class sounded more like an 8th grade Sunday School class rather than a doctoral program. Each student struggled desperately to articulate and explain the very process that had been intuitive to their decision making for years. Wrestling with terms, arguing over process, praying for the professor to swoop in and give them the answers, these students found themselves where most seminary students are as they begin to plumb the depths of practical theology concepts and literature. The 2011 cohort’s struggle and ensuing efforts to re-shape and refine their professor’s model would become the impetus for this essay.

For the past few years, the model I (Clark) proposed in the 2008 essay, Youth Ministry As Practical Theology, published in the Journal of Youth Ministry, Volume 7, in fall, 20081, has served as a guiding discernment process for masters and doctoral students in a variety of courses.
Although I have been far from satisfied that my 2008 model was fully adequate for theological students, it has been a helpful tool prompting discussion and application of practical theology history and models in a variety of settings. I have continued to adjust the earlier model in light of literature and critique from colleagues, and last spring the most recent D.Min. cohort collaborated on a top to bottom rewrite of the model. Building on the foundation of my work concerning youth ministry and practical theology we hope these thoughts and insights will continue to move us in the academic youth ministry community forward toward a common structure of theological inquiry. The intention for the first essay on this topic was twofold: “First, to help us as youth ministry educators to agree upon a common conceptual language and structure that would be able to move us forward in finding the academic "home" (practical theology) that will shape our thinking, teaching and practice for decades to come…Secondly, …to offer as a starting point a practical theology method that would be satisfying to a wide spectrum of practical theologians and at the same time be a useful tool to advance our field” (Clark, 2008, p. 67). As the first point of the original essay has continued to gain acceptance, this work will primarily focus on the second endeavor, further refining and framing a model of practical theology that “is both flexible enough to include all of us who teach and lead youth ministry thinking and practice and at the same time be true to the essential elements of contemporary practical theology” (2008, 69-70).

At the outset, our desire is to see this model as a tool for teaching and training youth ministry practitioners and leaders to encourage their community to work together to think, discern and respond theologically to life and ministry in any given context. We are not proposing that this is the only way in which practical theology can properly be done. What has become apparent, however, is the need for a method that encapsulates the key elements of the process of practical theology in a way that is understandable and even applicable to thoughtful practitioners.
Our goal is a continuation of what was proposed previously in the essay *Youth Ministry As Practical Theology*, “to equip our students in a clear and easily translatable method that can enable them to guide the believing community where they are called to serve in making kingdom-driven decisions and choices as they live in a complex and changing world, regardless of background, denomination, or tradition” (Clark, 2008, p. 14). We believe one of the best ways to do this is with a workable model of the practical theology process. Richard Osmer notes,

> In structuring educational pathways, it may be helpful for departments to draw on models, which chart developmental trajectories in the acquisition of critical thinking, reflective judgment, creativity, and skills. Hubert and Stuart Dreyfus, for example, described five levels in the acquisition of skills: novice, advanced beginner, competent performer, proficient performer, and expert. Novices rely heavily on rules offered by experienced "authorities" to guide their actions and tend to evaluate their performances in terms of how well they followed such rules… at the highest levels of skill for performance, people begin to rely on judgments that are highly intuitive and holistic (Osmer, 2008, p.225).

A precarious tendency of the novice theologian is to assume a level of competency and understanding reserved for the expert (relying too heavily on their highly intuitive instincts to guide their actions) when in reality they do not have the foundational understanding they should have learned as a novice. This approach leaves little room for the work of the Holy Spirit or the discernment of the faith community and often leads to actions that may possibly be described as “effective” according to the kingdom of this world, but does little to align with a sound theological praxis, what we refer to, borrowing from Ray Anderson’s “eschatological preference,” as the trajectory of the in-breaking kingdom of God. The church exists not to bring in the kingdom but rather to faithfully identify with, personify, and respond to what God is
doing in the world, the *mission dei*. As Craig Van Gelder and Dwight J. Zscheile describe in *The Missional Church in Perspective*, “God is a missionary God, and God’s mission involves a church sent into the world to represent the reign (kingdom) of God. Thus the church is missionary by nature.”

Osmer’s idea of the use of a model might be compared to working an algebra problem. While it is possible that one might stumble upon a correct answer simply by process of elimination or a serendipitous guess, a good teacher knows how important it is for a student to be able to show his or her work. If knowing how to “do the work” is more important for the growth of the emerging “math expert,” then similarly being trained in a theological discernment process is vital as we seek to respond to God’s call on our lives and ministries. This is why a carefully constructed and communally driven model of practical theology is so important. It allows us to teach students how to “show their work”, making sure that they learn apply and engage with others all of the richness practical theology has to offer when discerning a faithful course to pursue. What we hope to accomplish with this updated model is to go beyond the 2008 model, and based on broad conversation and recent practical theology literature, create a tool that is not only useful to those new to practical theology, but one that will grow and shape us over time. This model is offered because we believe that we in youth and family ministry need a discernment tool that is contextually and theologically robust enough for the academy, yet accessible to the church and its leaders.

So what is the “work” of practical theology that we must learn to show? To understand this concept a basic competency of the essence and theory of the unique discipline of practical theology is vital. Prior to the 1960’s practical theology was simply seen as “the fourth move in the four-fold encyclopedia behind biblical studies, church history, and dogmatics; the first three did the science, practical theology applied it” (Root, 2009, p. 56). In the past five decades,
practical theologians have successfully argued that practical theology is more than simple application. Richard Osmer summarizes the reasoning for this change well, “Practical theology as an academic field has its own distinctive research program. It makes its own constructive contribution to the theological enterprise as a whole and to the ongoing conversation of humankind in its quest for intelligibility. It carries out four mutually related intellectual operations: the descriptive-empirical, interpretive, normative, and pragmatic. This distinguishes practical theology from the social sciences, even as it overlaps these fields in certain ways” (Osmer, 2008, p. 240).

Don Browning is often credited with making the shift from pastoral (applied) theology to practical theology. “Browning proposed a new conception of practical theology based on an interdisciplinary correlation occurring between theology and the human sciences. He corrected the concept of practical theology as applied theology (theory-to-practice), and proposed a praxis-theory-praxis model using a comprehensive model of practical moral reasoning” (Kim, 2007, p. 429). James Fowler also picked up on this shift, describing practical theology as “theological reflection and construction arising out of and giving guidance to a community of faith in the praxis of its mission. Practical theology is critical and constructive reflection on the praxis of the Christian community’s life and work in its various, dimensions” (Fowler, 1983, p. 149, italics ours). Ray Anderson defined practical theology as "critical and constructive reflection on ecclesial praxis, is the process of ongoing critical reflection on the acts of the church in the light of the gospel and in critical dialogue with secular sources of knowledge with a view to the faithful transformation of the praxis of the church in the world" (Anderson, 2001, p. 59). Osmer fleshes out his definition of practical theology in light of his four tasks noted earlier:

Practical theology is that branch of Christian theology that seeks to construct action-guiding theories of Christian praxis in particular social contexts. In part, it
focuses on "how to"-how to teach, preach, raise children, influence society, and so forth. But this "how to" is informed by a strongly developed theory of "why to" why we ought to practice the Christian way of life in certain ways in light of an interpretation of a particular social context and the normative claims of the Christian community (Osmer, 2005, p. xiv).

Praxis-Theory-Praxis

One of the grounding hallmarks of practical theology has always been its use of the Aristotelian term praxis, and the idea that the any practical theology method must follow a "praxis-theory-praxis" process of inquiry and discernment. The term “practice” is sometimes mistakenly interchanged in practical theology literature synonymously with praxis. Praxis has its own unique features when compared to simply “practice.” Hyun-Sook Kim explains, “The Greek term praxis, frequently translated into English as ‘practice,’ implies more than the typical English definition for ‘practice.'” According to A Dictionary of Philosophy, practice was described as something pertaining to action, whereas praxis, itself, meant action or activity. Practical (Greek praktikos) referred to anything related to action, whereas the Greek theoretikos is classified as the theoretical or related to thought” (Kim, 2007, p. 421).6 Consider the game of golf, for example. You could seek to be a competent golfer, and so practice your swing, putting, judging the distance to the green, and understanding what club to use when you hit the ball. All of these elements are clearly important to becoming a good golfer, but none of these elements are, in and of themselves, the actual game of golf. At the risk of being accused of reductionism, practicing golf is not playing golf; playing golf is praxis.

Because this is such a central element of our model, we will restate our understanding of praxis from 2008 essay, Youth Ministry As Practical Theology:
Praxis is generally understood to be inseparable from the end goal telos... Telos describes both the ultimate or final outcome, or for our purposes the eschaton, as well as the essence of the practice itself. Praxis cannot move toward the goal of telos unless embedded within it are the values and ethos of the telos. It is this movement toward the telos, or the culmination of God's intended purpose for creation and redemption, that drives and infuses any practice that can be described as praxis. Telos, theologically described, is the applied endpoint of ethical or moral praxis. For the believing community, called and set apart for service in God's in-breaking kingdom toward the eschatological hope of creation, living the ethical standard of the kingdom of God now is equally as important as discerning God's future intent for all of creation. Telos includes both how we live now and how we are invited to experience life forever. (Clark, 2008, p. 22).

Applying the above example to our faith, our praxis, the action/activity that drives us, is the in-breaking of the Kingdom of God. It is the “already and not yet” that seeks to permeate our existence leading us towards the telos. Scott Cormode calls this “faithful action,” which must be faithful, effective, contextual, and communal (Cormode, 2004, p. 228). Our faith practices should help us to move towards faithful action, and therefore we must continually evaluate our practices in light of the trajectory, or in-breaking reality and calling, of God's kingdom in the world. Thus, from the beginning of the process, in this model of practical theology, as indeed all of Christian discipleship, we have but one goal – to communally align ourselves and participate with God in our attitudes, perspectives, convictions, and behaviors with who God is and what God is doing in the world. We learn who God is as we prayerfully and humbly seek to serve him, one another, and others in ministry. Ray Anderson, who defines ecclesial praxis as “a dynamic human process of critical reflection carried out” (Anderson, 2001, p. 51), put it, “In praxis, God’s
truth is revealed through the structures of reality by which God’s actions and presence are disclosed to us through our own actions. It is not our human actions that constitute the praxis of God. Rather, God acts through our human actions to reveal the truth” (ibid.).

Over the last few decades there have been many ideas, theories, methods and approaches as to how practical theology should be done. While there are still a wide variety of opinions on how (or even whether) to arrive at response, or, as Cormode puts it, faithful action, there does seem to be some consensus on what elements must be included in the process. “Even in the midst of this diversity,” writes Andrew Root, “practical theologians seem to be unified regarding a set of common tasks. Richard Osmer has done the most work in providing an account of these larger shared tasks” (Root, 2009, p. 66). Since our model seeks to appeal to the widest possible pool of people, we present these tasks here and, while we do not use the same terminology within the model as Osmer, will show how each of his tasks are found within the framework we propose.

As previously noted, Osmer uses four questions to guide his interpretation:

• What is going on?
• Why is this going on?
• What ought to be going on?
• How might we respond?

Answering each of these questions is the focus of one of the four core tasks of practical theological interpretation:

• The descriptive-empirical task. Gathering information that helps us discern patterns and dynamics in particular episodes, situations, or contexts.
• The **interpretive task**. Drawing on theories of the arts and sciences to better understand and explain why these patterns and dynamics are occurring.

• The **normative task**. Using theological concepts to interpret particular episodes, situations, or contexts, constructing ethical norms to guide our responses, and learning from “good practice.”

• The **pragmatic task**. Determining strategies of action that will influence situations in ways that are desirable and entering into a reflective conversation with the “talk back” emerging when they are enacted (Osmer, 2008, p. 4).

The first two tasks, **descriptive-empirical** and **interpretive**, are similar to our understanding of recognizing and reading the context into which we serve. The third, **normative**, is roughly equivalent to our theological reflection. The final task, **pragmatic**, “determining strategies of action,” is essentially the call to “faithful action” in our model. While the pieces themselves are not in complete agreement with Osmer, in either order or priority of the discernment process, the overall goal and basic elements are present.

4 Key Affirmations

The framework of the model we are proposing rests on four essential affirmations that carry throughout the entire process. While we recognize that there may be differing opinions related to the language or even perspective we offer here, our hope is that most Christian communities will find resonance with these basic foundational perspectives.

1) **The Holy Spirit is our guide**. The goal of practical theology is for God’s people, prompted and led by the work of the Holy Spirit, to carefully discern and align with God's kingdom activity in the world. We affirm Anderson’s view that the “truths of God are discovered through the encounter with Christ in the world by means of ministry” (Anderson, 2001, p. 29), and it is the
power and voice of the Holy Spirit that makes known those truths. Trusting that the Holy Spirit is at work in a believing community as they seek to love God and love others, the community is then drawn into a greater awareness of God’s intent for humanity. It is out of that humble awareness, encouraged by a Spirit-led discernment process, faithful action is brought about. Mark Lau Branson recognizes practical theology as “an ongoing transformational initiative of the Holy Spirit with a church” (Branson, 2006, p. 110). We recognize that the Holy Spirit should be the guiding principle throughout this process and, as such, can lead to discovery or revelation any point in the process. While this new model appears to be linear in nature, as a community continually committed to faithfully seeking the guidance and initiative of the Holy Spirit, the process is actually a never-ending feedback loop of ministry praxis, illuminated revelation and human response. Practical theology, then, is always about the activity of God and our response to that, discovered in and through the practice of ministry in a given context. The Holy Spirit’s role in this model, then, is essential to the vitality of the model. We also recognize that the process of practical theology can and perhaps should, at least at times, be more organic than systematic, as David White pointed out in his response to the earlier article *Youth Ministry As Practical Theology*. Drawing from Karl Barth's work, White questioned the technical-rational approach inherent in the model and noted that “life in the Holy Spirit is more appropriately akin to dancing than engineering, more aesthetic than technical” (White, 2008, p. 52).

Comparing practical theology to a dance is a compelling image, and we fully embrace White’s critique of the 2008 model. As a community of faith proactively listens to the prompting of the Holy Spirit while living out the kingdom of God in ministry, the beauty, mystery and majesty of God’s presence and activity is more readily recognized. God is always at work, and as the Psalmist reminds us “The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they reveal knowledge. They have
no speech, they use no words; no sound is heard from them. Yet their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world. (Psalm 19:1-4). Our ability to see and hear and experience God brings the joy of the kingdom dance. At the same time, while a free flowing dance can be engaging and moving to watch, the power and beauty of a disciplined and trained dancer is exponentially more powerful. It is worth noting that it takes work to become a great dancer. To ignore the technical side of dancing (anticipating the music, knowing the steps, understanding the timing, etc) takes away from the beauty of the performance. Great dancing takes practice. As Fowler says, “God can and does call us to a partnership (emphasis added) in the divine praxis” (Fowler, 2003, p. 239). To further apply this comparison, the model of practical theology we propose is designed to help us anticipate the music by training us to listen to the world that surrounds us. It helps us know the steps by understanding how, through the Holy Spirit, practice, theory, and praxis flow together to lead us towards a faithful response to the work of the God in the world.

2) **We affirm that practical theology begins and ends in context.** Practical theology does not begin with theory, as other branches of theology do, “it is *at least*a praxis-theory-praxis process of constant dialogue and interpretation, communal reflection and challenge, and a never-ending quest to hear God's voice and follow his call” (Clark, 2008, p. 21). Thomas Groome states that "Instead of theory leading to practice, theory becomes or is seen as the reflective moment in praxis, and articulated theory arises from that praxis to yield further praxis"(Groome, 1991, p. 152). As we noted in Kim’s definitions earlier, practical relates to action while theory focuses on thought. Thus, practical theology begins by examining our current actions and practices and then brings the weight of theological reflection to bear to create a Kingdom-oriented trajectory of faithful action lived out within our current context. That is why one may hear practical theology described as “doing theology from below” (Ballard & Pritchard, 1996, p. 80). Our context is
where we start; it is where we live, the “unique place, people, history, and story” that surround us (Clark, 2008, p. 18). Everything we do, everything we know and think, is experienced in context. We are caught up in its current and without careful and deliberate investigation; we are blissfully unaware of the ebb and flow it creates in our lives. Practical theology, then, seeks to enable and encourage awareness of our context, and to see God more clearly in and through that context. To borrow from a familiar analogy, it tries to help fish to understand what it means to live in water.9

3) *Practical theology draws its strength from a critical correlation between theology and other disciplines.* This is where the “work” of practical theology must be shown. Ballard and Pritchard write, “At a theoretical level (a hermeneutical dialogue) will be a critical correlation between theology and the social sciences, together illuminating the human condition. This method of 'critical correlation' has become central to much recent practical theology, not least in North America, developing a theme found in Paul Tillich and elaborated in more recent hermeneutical theology such as that of David Tracy” (Ballard and Pritchard, 1996, p. 49). Root adds, “Using theories from fields as diverse as sociology, evolutionary biology, literary studies, existentialism, object relations psychology, and education, to name but a few, the practical theologian seeks to provide an interpretation, a particular theoretical lens that helps explain why such an occurrence is happening” (Root, 2009, p. 67). The essay *Youth Ministry As Practical Theology* argued that “practical theology is in its essence a correlative relationship between theology and any other data set that can inform and illuminate God's call to his people. Whatever the source of these data sets, anything that speaks into the human condition such that believers can receive a deeper and more thorough understanding of the context in which the Gospel is to be lived out is an important part of a practical theology method” (Clark, 2008, p. 17). For the purposes of our model, we use the terms “The Lens of Secular Disciplines”10 and “Theological Reflection”11 to categorize the two areas of critical correlation necessary to the process of practical theology.
4) *Practical Theology is a communal process.* Although this has been an explicit commitment of this model, the process requires as much openness and as many voices coming together as is possible. Throughout practical theology literature this is perhaps the most consistent point of agreement. God’s Spirit speaks in and through members of a community, and the very act of corporate listening provides a much-needed filter to personal histories, biases and interpretations. Of course there is danger in any community process, to be sure, but the odds of faithful interpretation, appreciative inquiry and appropriate pastoral response to the discernment process is greatly enhanced when it is deliberated in and through community.

**Elements of the Model**

We now turn to the elements of the new practical theology model we are proposing as a foundational process for framing youth ministry in the future. Similar to the 2008 model, and as has been mentioned, the model seeks to move from a contextual identification of an issue – any issue – where a community realizes they must respond, to action that is aligned with God’s work in and around that issue. We call this, with Scott Cormode, Faithful Action. The goal is partnership initiated by, led by and empowered by the Spirit of God. The process is where a community seeks to be pliable clay as the Potter does the work (“God's Decree! ‘Watch this potter. In the same way that this potter works his clay, I work on you, people of Israel.’”

Jeremiah 18:6, *The Message*).

**FEEDBACK LOOPS**

While we have chosen not to visually retain the multiple feedback loops that dominated the 2008 model, it is imperative to understand that these mechanisms are implied throughout the
model and are essential to the method of practical theology. The process of asking new questions of old data is not limited to the initial steps of this model. It is understood that anytime fresh analysis introduces new data that calls into question our previous assumptions, we must go back into the process to revisit our understanding and conclusions up to that point. For example, if the analysis of a particular practice in light of one’s Context has led to defining an Issue one way, and, through the deliberation of Theological Reflection, new information demonstrates that what was assumed to be an appropriate response to a given issue was actually a well meaning but misguided local church custom, the discernment process must start over with a careful reconsideration of the Context. Or perhaps when seeking to determine the best way to contextualize Faithful Action, a community realized that what they are considering as a response has in fact stretched well beyond the anchor of Scripture resulting in a particular course of action that violates theological integrity (what we call Kingdom Trajectory). In this case, the appropriate “feedback loop” would be to revisit the Theological Reflection work that lead to the chosen Faithful Action, once again seeking to discern the movement and call of the Holy Spirit to guide you to a more theologically appropriate contextual and faith response. Critics of the 2008 model have pointed out that most practical theology models, including Ray Anderson’s, seek to avoid what Root calls “rigid Biblicism” (Root, 2011, p. 264). This is precisely the point at which no model of practical theology can or should trump a community’s hermeneutical convictions. Our goal in this model is not to state what the boundaries of what would, or should, kick back a proposed action, but to encourage an honest assessment of a community’s a priori theological (or cultural, or gender, or ethnocentric, etc.) bias to control the process. In our view, that is a commitment only a specific community can live up to.

CONTEXT
In developing this model, we have sought to refine and reshape the 2008 model while staying true to the original goal: “to equip our students in a clear and easily translatable method that can enable them to guide the believing community where they are called to serve in making kingdom-driven decisions and choices as they live in a complex and changing world, regardless of background, denomination, or tradition” (Clark, 2008, p. 14). At first glance, those familiar with the 2008 model might conclude that this model bears little resemblance to the original. In 2008 the model began with the word “context” formed across the top, and the overly-linear process proceeded from there. In this model (see Figure 1 – Clark-McEntyre Model), the swirling
spiral of Context is bounded by the kingdom of God (“Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven…”, Matthew 6:10). While we believe that this is a far better representation of reality, it is still greatly limited. If this model were to accurately depict even a miniscule percentage of the expansive and omniscient work of God in the world, there is no pictorial representation that could hope to do it justice. For the purpose of moving through a process of theological interpretation and discernment that leads us to closer alignment with God’s work in the world, we believe that a somewhat linear process that actually moves us in a direction toward faithful action remains helpful even while we recognize that we are all constantly being pushed and pulled by the contextual forces that surround us. The saving grace of this – in the model and in life – is the encircling power and grace of God’s kingdom presence.

There are several other revisions from the model presented in the essay Youth Ministry As Practical Theology. Some of these changes are purely to make the graphic more user friendly, and others to create a more robust and theologically appropriate model. Still other changes reflect how new insights, constructive critiques, and diligent classwork (especially with doctor of ministry and PhD students) have added more depth to the conversation, thus resulting in a clearer, more comprehensive approach. We trust that this model will be helpful to those new to the discipline of practical theology as well as those who are continuing to pioneer its future, especially in the unique field of youth ministry training. We freely affirm that there are other approaches to practical theology worthy of study, yet we also believe that this model can effectively give you the tools to do the work of practical theology well, building the foundation a novice needs to faithfully become an expert.

The process of practical theology begins with an invitation from the Holy Spirit to join in the work of the in-breaking of the Kingdom. This could be anything from a loud voice of crisis to that gentle whisper within that elicits a question. It is important to realize that the Holy Spirit
does not only draw our attention to problems and wrongdoing, but to any circumstance in which God’s kingdom can more clearly be known. However the invitation comes, the first step of practical theology is to resist the urge to hastily try and “fix” the presenting issue. Although practical theology is by its nature driven towards action (praxis), our goal is Faithful Action. Osmer’s first question asks, “What is going on?” To answer this question we must develop the discipline to hover above any situation or setting and observe the context from a bird’s eye viewpoint. What can I/we see? What do I/we notice? What is God drawing my/our attention to? Root says it this way, “Because the objective of practical theology is to attend to God’s action in the locations and practices of human individuals and communities, practical theologians must describe what is going on in concrete locales. In the descriptive task, therefore, the practical theologians will seek to answer the question "What is happening?" in a rigorous manner that sets forth a thick description of location” (Root, 2009, p.66). In his section on Describing, Osmer identifies an important step in this process. “It is worthwhile for students and leaders to learn the skill of attending to the words and actions of others without filtering them through interpretive and normative judgments. This is very important in the descriptive-empirical task of practical theological interpretation, which focuses on what is going on before reflecting on why it is going on or what ought to take place” (Osmer, 2008, p. 59). At this early stage of the process it is important to avoid assigning meaning and creating assumptive categories too quickly. Instead (thinking back to the illustration of trying to help the fish understand it is in water) we must seek to understand and describe the nature of the water, or Context, that surrounds. Our Context is what we swim in, what we live in, it is all around us, yet often we do not recognize its influence on all that we do.

For the purposes of our model, we depict context as swirling around and around in a spiral.[ Osmer presents this concept as applied to practical theological interpretation, but it is a
useful image for describing Context as well. “Often, thus, it is helpful to think of practical theological interpretation as more like a spiral than a circle. It constantly circles back to tasks that have already been explored” (Osmer, 2008, p. 11). Context is always moving, always changing, always swirling, but on its own does not move us toward the Kingdom of God. As we attend to this first task of practical theology, we represent the prompting of the Holy Spirit with a question mark to symbolize the need to ask two central questions: “What is going on?” and “What is God up to right before our eyes?” This is what it means to discern the nature of the CONTEXT.

Figure 2 – Clark-McEntyre Model: CONTEXT

Once we have thoroughly observed and described the Context in which the Holy Spirit has prompted us to act, we can begin the interpretive task of answering the question “Why is this
"What’s going on?” In order to bring clarity to how our specific area of Context is affecting our observations, we apply the interdisciplinary strength of practical theology. As noted above, we use the term Lens of Social Science to illustrate this task. It includes “anything that speaks into the human condition such that believers can receive a deeper and more thorough understanding of the context” (Clark, 2008, p. 17). Often we use tools such as sociology, psychology, psychiatry, ecology, family systems, and the study of culture, race, ethnicity, and class to create a thick interpretation of our Context. The practice of using the tools of social science to understand our current Context has been around since biblical times. On more than one occasion Paul quotes the work of ancient philosophers to lay a foundation for introducing the Gospel. The Lens of Secular Disciplines brings into focus how the current of Context affects our narrative and influences our practices. It also sharpens our awareness of how our lives, both corporately and individually, have been affected by the undertow of Context. (Imagine the difference between looking through the water at the ocean floor with the naked eye and looking at it with goggles on.) The model illustrates this by bringing into focus what lies beneath the Lens of Secular Disciplines.
The Lens of Secular Science will probably draw criticism from people like David White because it sounds like it does not take into account art or music etc. Your explanation of internal and external I think address this well and show that indeed it does include these areas. Just my thoughts.

For greater clarity within the Lens of Secular Disciplines, we have found it most useful to examine the Internal and External Factors within the broad scope of Context to best explain what shapes our practices. As described in *Youth Ministry As Practical Theology*, “There are two significant areas of influence that shape a context: relational (or internal) factors and environmental (or external) factors” (Clark, 2008, p.27). Internal Factors are by and large “those that are primarily relational and are generally located within the familial systems, structures, and
experiences that shape how a person or people group view themselves… These internal forces related to family systems and familial expectations and norms will shape how a community approaches and applies the Scriptures to their particular setting” (2008, p. 27). External Factors “include anything outside of the individual and their familial history that influences how a community and even a collection of individuals will think about a given issue. These include the various messages that mold opinion and perspective (including media, advertising, etc.), the ecological dynamics and resultant push of the context (how the whole shapes the specific), the various expressions (both overt, such as film, music, and other forms of directed message, and just as potent but less institutional, like language, humor, and the like) that comprise the elements of a collective narrative and continually swirl in and throughout a community while providing meaning and a sense of belonging to those living within the context, and any other the cultural force that has been forged over time that influences and guides a collective perspective” (Clark, 2008, p. 28).

In Figure 3a, The Clark-McEntyre Model: LENS OF SECULAR DISCIPLINES is magnified in order to grasp how these Internal and External Factors contribute to our understanding of the Context. The gray arrow moving through the model represents the ongoing guidance of the Spirit’s work throughout the process.
By examining our Internal and External Factors through the Lens of Secular Disciplines, our goal is to refine our questions and identify the true issue or issues that the Holy Spirit is revealing about our current practices. With this newfound clarity we are able to move forward in the work of practical theology. Yet, no matter how much clarity the Lens of Secular Disciplines brings to our situation, we must realize that it cannot move us toward the Kingdom of God on its own. As Pamela Erwin states, “Social science research is worthless if it does not help us better understand what it means to be human beings created in the image of our Creator God” (Erwin, 2006, p. 11). Andrew Root agrees:

It is crucial to remember that the empirical should not be the heart of the field of practical theology. It may be the lifeblood in our commitment to performative action/practice in location, but it is not the heart. The heart of practical theology, the organ that pumps the blood through the organism, is theology itself. Therefore, the practical theologian's work should not only possess deep reservoirs of reflection on experience, but also it must seek to reflect on God's continued action in the world. Theology should never be used functionally as a kind of add-
on. Rather it should provide direction for how the empirical task is done. Theology must remain the heart of the field, because its core objective is to discuss the association between divine and human action. While empirical work provides invaluable perspectives on human action, the divine can only be articulated theologically. Therefore, practical theology is a process of deep theological reflection (Root, 2009, p. 70).

THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

Once our Issue within its Context has been determined and defined, the issue is then brought into the work of Theological Reflection. Theological Reflection is the part of the process where we bring to bear the fullness of the Christian faith understanding to the issue at hand. In practical theology this is the process by which we attempt to discern God’s call to faithful action. Richard Osmer, for example, considers a variation of this process, in what he calls “Theological Interpretation,” the normative task necessary to answer the question, “What ought to be going on?” In our model, the goal of Theological Reflection is to bring our issue into alignment with the work of the Kingdom. As the process unfolds, the desired outcome is a more deliberate alignment with God’s work and purpose than we had at the outset. The result of this we call the Kingdom Trajectory: “movement towards God’s ultimate trajectory for us as he brings his kingdom to fruition” (Clark, 2008, p.32). What Kenda Creasy Dean calls, “the radical congruency between God’s action and our action” (Dean, 2001, p. 225). It is appropriate to note that the revelation of new information may call into question our previous assumptions. Anytime this occurs, we must revisit each step of the process to make sure that our perceived Kingdom Trajectory is in fact an appropriate expression of God’s revelation.

The most significant difference in this model from 2008 is the renaming of the Biblical Exegesis section to the broader, more inclusive term, Theological Reflection. After continued dialogue around the topics raised by those who responded to the first article, we feel that this
change creates a more robust approach, yet still remains true to the original intent of the first model. You will see in the model that Theological Reflection is depicted as three interlocking circles within a larger circle. The larger circle represents all that is bounded by the process of Theological Reflection; while the smaller circles within represent Theology, Tradition, and Experience. These three each bring a unique series of questions to any contextual issue, and thus this model interdependently pulls the theological and praxiological perspectives of each to the whole. Theology encompasses all of the ways in which we think about God. It draws from such rich disciplines as systematic, philosophical, historical, contextual, and ethical theology to reveal Kingdom truth about our current issue. Tradition includes both historical and local church history. Through Tradition we bring to bear the timeless wisdom and practices of the Church as well as unique denominational views, doctrines, and congregational beliefs that influence our issue in light of specific Context. Experience acknowledges the revelation of God in both our corporate and individual lives. It provides space for the beauty of “worship, discernment, and prayer” to permeate the issue at hand (White, 2008, p. 52). All three elements are essential to the task of Theological Reflection. Each circle balances and tests the other in order to eventually lead to Kingdom Trajectory.
In the center of the circle, where Theology, Tradition, and Experience overlap, is the symbol of the cross and an open Bible. Guiding this model is the revelation of Christ as revealed through Scripture. We believe that in the work of Theological Reflection, all of these elements must be seen and interpreted in the light of Christ as revealed through Scripture by the Holy Spirit. Scripture is the anchor that holds the course of our Kingdom Trajectory true in the ever-changing current of Context. Anderson uses the term biblical antecedent to address this idea: “As nearly as I can see, for every case in which eschatological preference (Kingdom Trajectory) was exercised by the Spirit in the New Testament church, there was a biblical antecedent for what appeared to be revolutionary and new” (Anderson, 2001, p. 109). While the biblical antecedent guides our course, it is the light of Christ that illuminates our path toward Kingdom Trajectory and ultimately Faithful Action. Any action we agree to move forward with once the process of
Theological Reflection is satisfied must be supported by a biblical antecedent, respectful of our faith community and Context, and remain true to Kingdom Trajectory.

In her response to the 2008 essay *Youth Ministry As Practical Theology*, Dean expressed the concern that the model presented bordered on biblicism, “supplanting the living person of Christ with the written Bible” (Dean, 2008, p. 43). She would later state that she was “more comfortable suggesting that… practical theology should imitate Christ, not the Bible, recognizing that Scripture is the revelation against which all other claims about God must be measured—but also recognizing that human communities sometimes miss God's point, and that divine revelation did not end with the last word of the Bible” (2008, p. 44). While this model retains a high view of Scripture, Dean’s (and others’) insightful caution with the 2008 model drove us to rethink how the Bible is used in the new model. We believe that by incorporating the work of Theology, Tradition, and Experience as we weigh God’s call to his people as revealed through Scripture, we have provided a thick description of Theological Reflection that faithfully guides us towards Kingdom Trajectory.

**KINGDOM TRAJECTORY**

Theological Reflection (if done thoroughly and well) leads to Kingdom Trajectory. Kingdom Trajectory carries us towards the final task in our model. Osmer calls this the pragmatic task of “Determining strategies of action that will influence situations in ways that are desirable” (Osmer, 2008, p. 4). He, and many others, like Scott Cormode and Mark Lau Branson, uses the question “How might we respond?” to describe this task. It is here that we must be careful to dig deeper than Osmer’s question prompts. There is more to the end of the model than just our response. In order for our Kingdom Trajectory to carry us through to Faithful Action, we must return again to our Context. To simply respond to our Theological Reflection without
considering how the Context will affect the response runs the risks of action that is less than faithful.

Imagine a faith community where the majority of the membership is affluent and follows a patriarchal model of family structure. Say the leadership of this community discerns that the Holy Spirit is prompting them to minister to those in the immediate neighborhood, which consists largely of a poor, matriarchal driven society that distrusts authority. Let’s assume that the church family observed the Context around them, employing the Lens of Secular Disciplines to attempt to understand the systemic problems their neighbors are facing, and used the process of Theological Reflection to determine how God is calling them to take proactive and faithful action in order to serve those God loves. They agree that the Holy Spirit is leading them to start a community center in the neighborhood to help raise up young leaders with positive role models and career training opportunities for those involved. Now imagine that instead of re-examining how this course of Faithful Action could best be implemented within the specific Context of the neighborhood, they use their own contextual norms to launch their ideas. They approach wealthy benefactors to donate money for the building. They work with city and county officials to determine the best location for the center and they approach men in the community for their input and leadership on the project. They even purchase equipment and hire instructors to teach 3 distinct career paths that many in the congregation have found to be profitable. The plan accomplishes the tasks of the Faithful Action but by neglecting the use of the Lens of Social Science to understand how to best live out the plan in light of the Context, they miss out on an expanded kingdom presence. Had they followed this model faithfully they might have realized the need to seek grass roots support in the community, starting with the grandmothers. They might have sought community by in with input on where the center should be built. They might have realized that career options for the people in the community are quite different from their
own and chosen different tracks to pursue. These insights could be invaluable to the in-breaking of God’s kingdom and to Faithful Action.

FAITHFUL ACTION

To recognizing how the Kingdom Trajectory can best lead us to hit our mark of Faithful Action, we must set our sights back on our specific Context. Gerben Heitink explains, “The exercise of practical theology does not have the church, but rather society, as its horizon” (Heitink, 1999, p. 9). Practical theology is constantly working towards the in-breaking of the Kingdom “on earth as it is in heaven.” As we started at the beginning of this article, practical theology is a praxis-theory-praxis method. Using The Lens of Secular Disciplines will allow us to best interpret how to live out and apply our Kingdom Trajectory in our particular Context to accomplish Faithful Action. It is important to remember that this entire process is initiated and guided by the work of the Holy Spirit, represented by the gray arrow through out the model.
Finally, once our Theological Reflection leads to a Kingdom Trajectory that is informed by the Lens of Secular Disciplines to best understand how to live out Faithful Action in light of our current Context, we come to the end of Osmer’s four core tasks and our cycle of *praxis-theory-praxis* is fulfilled. Yet, in this model one step still remains. Picking up on the work of Ray Anderson, we choose to follow him beyond the more common usage of *praxis* as the call to faithful action of believers, and choose instead to use his term of *Christopraxis* to define the process and desired outcome of practical theology. Whereas Osmer asks "How might *we* (emphasis added) respond?" Anderson asks, "What is *Christ* (emphasis added) doing in this situation?" For Anderson, Christopraxis is itself a continuation of Christ’s own ministry of revelation and reconciliation. The process of practical theology invites us to journey with the Holy Spirit to offer our Faithful Action to join with Christ’s ministry of reconciliation.
(Christopraxis) to usher in the in-breaking of the Kingdom of God (On earth as it is in heaven) in our particular Context.

Figure 5, The Clark-McEntyre Model: CHRISTOPRAXIS

David White reminds us that “in describing contexts we are not recounting and parsing neutral facts. We are describing the beauty and brokenness of the concrete world that God
inhabits” (White, 2008, p. 54). God offers us the chance to join in this endeavor. Fowler captures this reality by saying, “The danger is that we…often functionally forget or give in to doubt that the praxis of God is active and powerful. We forget that we are called to be partners who trust, in faith, that God is at work” (Fowler, 2003, p. 241). The tasks of practical theology can bring the power of our Creator in the very Context in which we live. The work of the Holy Spirit and the in-breaking of the Kingdom ultimately lead to further revelations of new praxis’ that need to be examined. Thus, this model of practical theology is actually an ongoing process of revelation, reflection, reaction to the work of the Holy Spirit, and partnership in the reconciliation of Christ.
References


Dean, Kenda Creasy and Andrew Root, The Theological Turn in Youth Ministry, Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2011


Endnotes

1 This essay is a continuation of the conversation that was started in the essay "Youth Ministry as Practical Theology." by Chap Clark in the Journal of Youth Ministry 7, no. 1 (2008): 9-38. To best understand the arguments and language laid out in this essay, it would be worth while to read the original essay, the three responses by Kenda Creasy Dean (p.39-48), David F. White (p. 49-58), and Gary A. Parrett (p. 59-66), as well as Chap Clark’s rejoinder (p. 67-76).

2 This is what Ray Anderson calls the “eschatological preference” (or what some call “teleological preference”) rooted in Christology and the Trinity (2001, p. 109-127). As Root makes clear, “seeing youth ministry as a theological task moves youth ministry beyond utilitarianism and demands that we do real reflection on the practice of ministry and the young people to and with whom we minister… (the youth minister is) called to discern the multiple layers and nuances of God’s activity and the actions of people, and then to seek creative ways to facilitate their understanding of and participation in God’s action in the world” (“God is a minister,” The Theological Turn in Youth Ministry, with Kenda Creasy Dean, Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2011, p. 41).

3 Anderson asserts that the kingdom presence and mission in the world is the defining identity of the church: “With the person and ministry of God incarnated through Jesus of Nazareth, the culture of the kingdom became a living power and presence. Through the calling of the twelve disciples, Jesus reconstituted the kingdom community and culture. He delivered the ethical mandate of the kingdom as the Sermon on the Mount and invited everyone, without discrimination, to enter the kingdom.” (Ray S. Anderson, The Shape of Practical Theology: Empowering Ministry with Theological Praxis. Downer’s Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001, 235).

4 Missional Church in Perspective, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011, p. 7. The authors later more pointedly affirm the church’s call to align with the reign (kingdom) of God, “Discipleship is following Christ into participation in God’s mission in the world in the power of the Spirit” (p. 148).

5 Throughout this essay we seek to emphasize that many if not most recent practical theology models eventually lead to the discernment process informing if not guiding action. The following quotes from Osmer and Anderson further reinforce this point. Although Root states that Anderson’s “project seeks to place practical theology in the revelation of God, somewhere very different from behavior or conduct” (“Postscript: Reflecting on Method,” Theological Turn, ibid, fn 32, p. 263), it is our view that throughout Anderson’s corpus there is a constant pastoral commitment that a robust theological process of discernment must ultimately make a difference in how the church lives and works in response. It is in this spirit that this practical model we are proposing is approached. It is, in effect, what we see as one of Andrew Root’s greatest gifts to the youth ministry community, where he states, “This all leads me to assert that to do theology you must be in ministry. By this I mean you must be seeking to discover how God is active in the lives of concrete people I the world, and join that. Our actions in ministry with people whom God loves and stands with and for become the material of original and deep theological thought. But our ministerial actions themselves also loudly assert theological truths” (“God is a minister,” ibid, p. 40).


7 Root noted that Osmer has asserted in an earlier work (2007) that “These four core tasks mutually impact each other and work as a kind of hermeneutical circle. No task holds more value than the others, though some practical theologians may personally overemphasize one task to the detriment of the others” (Root, 2009, p. 286). We agree that all of the tasks are important to accomplish the work of practical theology in that if you skip a task, the process as a whole loses value. But we do contend that the process of Theological Reflection is more authoritative when determining Faithful Action than the other parts of the process. In other words, if in the working of the process the interpretive task and the normative task appear to be in conflict, it is the normative task (Theological Reflection) that should ultimately guide our direction.

8 Not only does our model rely on the basic elements of Ormer’s seminal model, but in many ways Dean’s shorthand descriptor of the process of practical theology (“understand a situation,” “reflect on this situation,” and “construct a faithful response”, “Introduction,” Theological Turn, ibid., p. 18) as well as Root’s (start with “experience,” move to “reflection and evaluation,” and culminate in “action,” ibid., p. 45) and also Clark and Powell’s (the process moves from “Now” to “New” to “Who” to “How,” Chap Clark and Kara Powell, Deep Ministry in a Shallow World, Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006) models.
I do not know the origin of the question, but I remember being asked it as a youth. “How do you describe water to a fish?” The point being that it is all they have ever known and they have nothing by which to compare it to, so the implication is they wouldn’t even know it was there.

This phrase was inspired by Amy E. Jacober, who uses the phrase “secular discipline” in describing the import of correlation in practical theology. Citing the work of James Poling and Donald Miller, Dr. Jacober states: “…three types (of correlation) are also on a continuum: critical scientific uses a secular discipline as the framework and norms, while tradition (theology) plays a secondary role; critical correlation seeks a collaborative dialogue between the Christian tradition (or theology) and the secular discipline; in the critical confessional type, Christian tradition is considered normative while cautiously considering the secular sciences and minimizing the influence of norms outside of the Christian tradition” (A. E. Jacober, The Adolescent Journey: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Practical Youth Ministry, IVP, 2011, 42). In the 2008 model “Social Science” was the descriptor of theology and the world, whereas we agree with Jacober that “secular disciplines” is a more holistic, and therefore more appropriate, label for a practical theology model. We are greatly indebted to Dr. Jacober for her insights and perspective on the use of the secular sciences in practical theology.

Richard Osmer prefers “Theological Interpretation” instead of the more generic (and far more utilized) term, “Theological Reflection.” In the interests of seeking to include the widest possible dialogue, we have chosen to stay with the more common term, recognizing that our reflection is an interpretive process.

There are times that the Holy Spirit may prompt this process in order to bring about a personal or congregational revelation that occurs in the midst of working the model. (i.e. while engaging the Lens of Social Science you realize that the fault did not lie with the practice, but in a misunderstanding of church tradition, or that personal issues of abandonment or a need for approval were actually at the core of the problem.) If this is the case, the feedback loop should help you recognize that a) your initial practice is still faithful and there is no need to continue, or b) that in light of your new revelation you need to adjust your Issue before you proceed with the model.

Osmer uses the specific terms of episodes, situations, contexts, and systems to explain contextual analysis. While this model does not use Osmer’s specific terminology, each of these concepts can be applied within the model we are proposing.

In Titus 1:12, Paul quotes the Cretan philosopher Epimenides, “12 One of Crete’s own prophets has said it: ‘Cretans are always liars, evil brutes, lazy gluttons.’” And in Acts 17:28, Paul quotes both Epimenides[a] and the Cilician Stoic philosopher Aratus[b], “28’For in him we live and move and have our being.’[a] As some of your own poets have said, ‘We are his offspring.’[b] Although they are not named, we can see in Acts 17 the main elements supported in this model.