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# *An Uncertain Certainty*

Snapshots in a Journey from “Either-Or”  
to “Both-And” in Christian Ministry

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Foreword by  
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## AN UNCERTAIN CERTAINTY

Snapshots in a Journey from “Either-Or” to “Both-And” in Christian Ministry

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*“I am a bishop for you,  
I am a Christian with you”*

—AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO

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### Authority of the Spirit

**M**ANY YEARS AGO I ATTENDED A LARGE GATHERING OF CHRISTIANS in the north of England, during which a number of contentious issues were raised by one of the invited speakers from the United States. As we streamed out of the large building in which the convention took place, I spied a friend of mine who had recently left the Anglican church at which I was at that time a lay pastor and evangelist. I scurried over to him, trying not to get too wet in the driving rain, and asked him what he thought of the speaker’s address. He mumbled a few words of approval, but I pressed him regarding some of the more provocative elements of the talk. I was expecting at least some reflective response, as my friend had only just become a pastoral leader in one of the newer charismatic “house churches” which had sprung up in the 1970s in England. To my surprise, my friend avoided a direct answer, replying with some ardor that it was up to his senior pastor to give direction on such issues: “After all, he’s the one in authority in our church!” I was dismayed by his answer, though I knew where he was coming from. The church to which he belonged espoused a doctrine of ecclesial authority which was at odds with my own understanding at that time of the key Reformation principle of “the priesthood of all believers.” Martin Luther’s doctrine of the self-authenticating truth of the gospel in the hearts of believers, as revealed by the Spirit of God,

was lost to my friend in favor of a form of "revelation knowledge" confined to a select band of charismatic leaders who exercised a radical and, at times, extreme form of authority over their flock.

Alister McGrath has summarized the matter admirably: "Who has the authority to speak in the name of God to His people?"<sup>1</sup> Who indeed? In this chapter we will examine this issue with regard to the ministry of leadership, and how that call is interpreted within the community of faith. Here we notice the interplay between leadership and authority in the particular context of Christian congregational life and ministry. In *The Tortoise Usually Wins*, Brian Harris' recent book on what he calls "quiet leadership," the author perceptively observes that leadership "is about helping move individuals and groups towards desired outcomes."<sup>2</sup> If, as Paul teaches in his Corinthian discussion of orderly worship, *everyone* has a part to play in the strengthening of the church (1 Cor 14:26), then it is incumbent upon those who have been given the special responsibility of discerning and, as a consequence, facilitating the Spirit's leading to embrace the contributions of those on whom the authority of the Spirit may rest at any particular time. It is clear that in the Pauline communities charismatic gifts were distributed amongst the congregational members. However, as demonstrated clearly in the Appreciative Inquiry process discussed in chapter 8, we should not limit their participation to *charismata*: everyone has a story to tell, memories to share, hopes to which to aspire, and these all feed into the mix of what the Spirit is saying to the church.

As we will note throughout this chapter, a genuine Spirit-led ecclesiology will therefore comprise those who are leaders precisely because they both value the personal narrative of every member of the congregation and also recognize the unique authority of the Spirit mediated through whom-ever he chooses, irrespective of their position in the church. At the same time, of course, such leaders will also be recognized by the congregation because of their spiritual discernment and their capacity to inspire church members to embrace "the desired outcomes" that the Spirit is opening up before them. In this connection, the American pastor and theologian Howard Friend proposes three leadership functions—inspiration, consultation, and celebration—at the heart of what he calls *adhocracy*, whereby leaders may be defined as those who "create and nurture a climate of expectancy, of responsibility-taking, of eager lay initiative."<sup>3</sup>

1. McGrath, "A Better Way," 301.
2. Harris, *Tortoise Usually Wins*, 87.
3. Friend, "Leading from the Bottom Up," 50.

## Clergy and Laity

My purpose, however, is not to examine the nature and qualities of leadership, Christian or otherwise: much has already been written on that topic. Rather, consistent with my espousal of the “both-and” paradigm, I will argue in this chapter that authority within the life of the church is both a “top-down” and a “bottom-up” phenomenon. McGrath confronts what he describes as the intense authoritarianism found in many expressions of ministry in “modern power evangelicalism,” paralleling the sacerdotalism of the medieval priesthood.<sup>4</sup> At root is the relationship between what we may call here “professional ministers of the gospel” and all other “lay” Christian people. Luther, of course, challenged the very notion of a distinction, at least ontologically, between clergy and laity, insisting that the only difference is one of function. However, in our eagerness to promote the priesthood of all believers and the creative ministry of the Spirit at work in all Christians, we must be careful not to dismiss the notion of ordination, even though we may choose not to adopt that term. In his 1976 Grove Booklet, *Authority and Ministry*, John Goldingay argues that there is no valid theology of ordination, and therefore “the emperor has no clothes!”<sup>5</sup> Whilst Goldingay rightly challenges the notion of authority being vested in a single person—usually male—at the top, perhaps a more generous “both-and” case may be made for clothing the emperor as well as his subjects!

In chapter 7 we noted Stephen Pickard’s advocacy of what we might describe as a “both-and” leadership paradigm, where neither ordained nor other ecclesial ministries can be what they are *without the other*, indicative of what he calls a genuine Spirit-inspired complementarity between an emergent ministerial order and a “top-down” influence. Speaking on the anniversary of his ordination, the great early Christian theologian and bishop Augustine of Hippo draws these two dimensions together in an exquisite tension in these famous words: “But if you would sustain me, that we may bear our burdens for each other according to the precept of the Apostle, then thus we will together and for each other be fulfilling the law of Christ. . . . In the times when I am frightened that I am *for* you, I am then consoled that I am *with* you. . . . I am a bishop *for* you, I am a Christian *with* you.”<sup>6</sup> So how might we see this tension played

4. McGrath, “A Better Way.”

5. Goldingay, *Authority and Ministry*, 24.

6. Augustine, *Works of Saint Augustine*, 292.

out in the context of local church leadership? Given the strength of feeling on both sides—amongst those who endorse the primacy of ordained ministry over “the priesthood of all believers,” and congregationalists for whom “the ministry of the entire church is associated with that of Christ, through the Holy Spirit”<sup>7</sup>—are there any fruitful models to which we might turn in order to support a “both-and” leadership paradigm?

Pickard’s reflections on this issue, drawing from his own scientific insights, are a useful starting point in our discussion of the nature and function of leadership and the attendant tensions between hierarchical and collaborative approaches to pastoral leadership. Taking his cue from the Anglican threefold order of bishops, priests, and deacons and the vocation and ministry of *all the faithful* (lay and ordained), Pickard asks: “is there a way of understanding the inner relations between the ministries of the church that justifies genuine collaboration and confers enriched ministerial capacities on all ministries?”<sup>8</sup> Pickard is a realist with regard to how human beings behave in community, recognizing the reality of conflict and disharmony in human relationships. Accordingly, his ecclesiology seeks to avoid what he describes as “an idealized vision of human society generated from an abstracted theory of Divine operations.”<sup>9</sup>

### Truncated Ecclesiology

In this connection, Pickard rightly notes that contemporary trinitarian thinking has not been as productive as it might have promised in this area: he specifically critiques the way the doctrine of *perichoresis* has been inadequately translated into the church context, leading to what he calls a “truncated ecclesiology.” In a similar vein, in her critique of the way that *perichoresis* has been interpreted as a negation of “the eternal order of Father begetting Son and ‘spirating’ the Spirit,” Edith Humphrey argues that mutuality and asymmetry seem to cohere in the trinitarian mystery.<sup>10</sup> She challenges those who postulate that some form of hierarchical order is a sign of discord or misconduct within inner-trinitarian relations: “Only in the Godhead do we see the answer to the dichotomy that we tend to

7. Greenwood, *Transforming Priesthood*, 142.

8. Pickard, *Theological Foundations*, 123.

9. Pickard, *Seeking the Church*, 104.

10. Humphrey, “Gift of the Father,” especially 94–102.

make, both intellectually and in our lives, between mutuality and order. . . . In the wisdom of the Holy Spirit, we have come to understand that hierarchy and mutuality are not at odds in the triune God, but an ineffable mystery.”<sup>11</sup> The Trinity, she maintains, presents us with a paradox that confronts our rational, democratic ideologies, and this is a particularly important observation in our attempts to translate our understanding of trinitarian relations to an ecclesial context.

A number of recent trinitarian theologians—such as Catherine LaCugna, Paul Fiddes, Miroslav Volf, and Colin Gunton—have argued that the mutuality and reciprocity implicit in the intradivine life is normative as the ontological ground for all human interactions (see chapter 3), but for Pickard there are some underlying problems in seeking a correspondence between divine and ecclesial *perichoresis*. These have to do with what he perceives as the doctrine’s failure to attend to conflict and tension (noted above), the tendency for it to be restricted to “the community of the redeemed” disconnected from the wider society, and its lack of depth and reach, unable to “embrace the dynamic ways in which God’s transformative work occurs throughout creation.”<sup>12</sup> In response, I would agree that we must not ask of *perichoresis* what it cannot deliver, precisely because it essentially expresses that which ultimately is not achievable amongst human beings: the indwelling of other persons is an exclusive prerogative of God. Human beings participate in the perichoretic life of God in a distinctively *different* way to that which reflects the interiority of trinitarian divine life: the Spirit indwells human persons, but humans do not indwell the *person* of the Spirit in the same way that the Father and Son indwell him in divine *perichoresis*. Therefore, as Volf points out, “it is not the mutual perichoresis of human beings, but rather the indwelling of the Spirit common to everyone that makes the church into a communion corresponding to the Trinity.”<sup>13</sup> Citing Fiddes, we noted in chapter 7 that human beings can, in an analogous sense, “dwell in the places opened out within the interweaving relationships of God; they dwell, we might say, not in ‘spaces of subjectivity’ but in ‘relational spaces.’”<sup>14</sup> So we do need care, and perhaps some restraint, in the way we make trinitarian connections between the human and the divine. This is why Pickard rightly

11. Humphrey, “Gift of the Father,” 98–99.

12. Pickard, *Seeking the Church*, 107.

13. Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 213.

14. Fiddes, *Participating in God*, 50.



insists that the key to the life of the church is the dynamic energy of the Holy Spirit, ever seeking to lead it more deeply into the life of God as well as into the life of the world, "patterning the life of Jesus."<sup>15</sup>

Pickard similarly notes the limitations of trinitarian thinking with regard to the reciprocal nature of lay and ordained ministries, leading him to explore the notion of order and the specific contribution of the physical sciences in his search for a resolution. Noting the rise of Darwinian evolutionary thinking in the nineteenth century, he acknowledges science's uncovering of "the richly dynamic implicate order of the world and human life,"<sup>16</sup> in which order emerges *from below*, rather than as a "top-down" phenomenon. In developing his thesis, Pickard turns to the science of *emergence*, a term that describes what happens when an interconnected system of relatively simple elements self-organizes to form more intelligent, more adaptive, and complex higher-level behavior.<sup>17</sup> At the most basic level of understanding, emergence may be described as a "bottom-up" process that represents "a movement from low-level rules to higher-level sophistication."<sup>18</sup> Michael Fuller offers three simple scientific examples in which emergent properties arise: water, a cell, and a human brain. Water molecules are not in themselves wet, yet combined with many others they produce "wetness"; proteins, nucleic acids, and other chemicals are themselves not alive, but combined into a cell they become a living organism; finally, a neuron is not conscious, but acting together with other neurons it produces consciousness.<sup>19</sup>

Closely related to the concept of emergence are the notions of *complexity* and *chaos*. When scientists talk about complexity, they refer to intricate self-organizing patterns of cells, organisms, neural networks in the brain, ecosystems . . . indeed the whole cosmos. Chaos theory refers not to total disorder, but to unaccountable natural processes in which extraordinarily complex patterns arise unpredictably out of turbulence. This occurs when the heat is turned on under a pan of soup: molecules move around all over the place in a dramatic frenzy of activity, and then, when the conditions are right, hexagonally shaped convection cells form as the liquid gets hotter. This is a classic example of "bottom-up"

15. Pickard, *Seeking the Church*, 115.

16. Pickard, *Theological Foundations*, 133.

17. For a helpful non-scientific introduction to the concept of emergence, see Johnson, *Emergence*.

18. *Ibid.*, 18.

19. Fuller, *Atoms and Icons*, 32.

emergence, a higher-level order arising out of disorder. Other common examples include the sudden appearance of a vortex in the disordered turbulence of a flowing river, and the remarkable emergence of six-sided crystalline snowflakes from randomly moving water vapor molecules. In his discussion of emergence, Steven Johnson refers to the behavior of ant colonies: remarkably, there is no command structure telling the ant what to do. In a quite extraordinary way ants participate in the life of the colony in a coordinated fashion not because they are carrying out orders from a leader, but because they respond at the immediate, local level to all that is going on around them. They do not have a “big picture” available in order to determine their behavior.<sup>20</sup>

## Open Systems

What has all this to do with church leadership? Well, quite a lot. In applying the new insights of quantum theory, complexity, and chaos theory to the field of human organization and management, Margaret Wheatley—whose book *Leadership and the New Science* is credited with establishing a fundamentally new approach to how we think about organizations—describes life as “open systems that engage with their environment and continue to grow and evolve.”<sup>21</sup> She suggests that organizations that regard themselves as open systems, adapting to their environments in fluid, flexible ways and avoiding the rigidity that accompanies an over-reliance upon structures, are more likely to sustain themselves. Pickard affirms the rich correspondence between the multi-layered, complex, and graduated ordering of physical reality, permitting—even *requiring*—some form of hierarchical structuring, and the nature of institutional life. Acknowledging the modern antipathy towards order *per se*, he proposes a conceptual understanding of order as a “mode of togetherness,” a constructive term that focuses on mutually supportive and creative relations. In the same way that the science of emergence presents us with an ordering of the world that relies upon layered orders and hierarchy, so in the life of the church ministries at all levels “are co-related, integrally and dynamically linked and in this way truly establish one another.”<sup>22</sup> The integrating “mechanism” or instrument in the life of the church enabling

20. For a biblical insight on this, see Prov 6:9.

21. Wheatley, *Leadership and the New Science*, 77.

22. Pickard, *Theological Foundations*, 142.

this to happen is the activity of the Holy Spirit: "the transcendent agency of the Spirit is immanent within the natural ecclesial system generating a cruciform pattern of order."<sup>23</sup>

The model presented here, grounded theologically in the life-giving presence of the Spirit in creation, is one that involves the exercise of authority *within* the community of the church, mediated by the Spirit, who is ever at work in life-affirming ways to proclaim the mystery of God's ways. So the Spirit directed the leaders at Antioch to set apart Barnabas and Paul for apostolic ministry (Acts 13:1-3), and in many and various ways he led the early church in its ministry in the world. Today the Christian church is privileged to have the Bible as its agreed measure of orthodoxy, by which the inspired direction of the Spirit may be tested. But this must never be interpreted as giving Scripture authority over the Spirit, who is, of course, the Spirit of Christ.

In *Dancing in the Dark* I cite an incident that is particularly appropriate in the light of the above.<sup>24</sup> In 1966 Michael Harper, seeking material for a book on the charismatic movement within the churches in the United States, travelled to the Episcopal Church of the Redeemer in Houston, Texas, and discovered a remarkable work of the Spirit amongst the people there, shaping them into a compassionate, charismatic community of faith reaching out to society. What particularly struck Harper in the incident he records was how authority was expressed in a number of complementary and mutually reinforcing ways. The minister knew the inward call of God on his life, yet he was also aware of the need to submit himself to those whom he was called to serve. Direction came through the Spirit's ministry amongst the people of God, yet the mantle of leadership was not lifted from his shoulders. Charismatic gifting was evident in a prophetic word submitted by a member of the congregation: such manifestations of *charismata* were not uncommon in the everyday life of the church community. Within the tradition of the church in question, a joyful atmosphere of worship was evident, enhanced through liturgy and sacraments. At the same time, there was a high respect for the Scriptures, as Harper's account demonstrates.<sup>25</sup>

There is a noticeable correspondence between the experience of the Pauline churches in their mediation of the authority of God and that of

23. Ibid., 142.

24. Buxton, *Dancing*, 146-47.

25. Harper, *New Way of Living*, 20-21.

the Houston community quoted above. As Robert Banks reminds us, authority in the local church in Paul's day "resides not only in the most prominent members but in everyone without exception": each Pauline community was "a *participatory* society in which authority is dispersed throughout the whole membership."<sup>26</sup> Undoubtedly, there is risk in not toeing a strictly traditional or ecclesiastical line, and being willing to be open to the leading of the Spirit. Misinterpretation of God's word may occur, perhaps through immaturity or human fallibility; even worse, mischievous, even heretical, leaders may manipulate whole congregations. But the risk of *not* being open to the Spirit is perhaps even greater. Where adequate safeguards are introduced, the spontaneous and Spirit-inspired exercise of authority within the dynamic life of the Christian community can be a powerful demonstration of the life and joy of God.

In similar vein, Jürgen Moltmann, in *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*, discusses the relationship between the "assignments," or callings, of individual people and the calling of the community as a whole. Commenting on those who function in the church in their assigned tasks, he points out that their commission "does not separate them from the people and *does not set them above the people either*, for it is exercised in fellowship with and by commission of the whole people and in the name of that people's commissioning. But the thing for which the people are commissioned does not come from them themselves; it comes from their God, in whose name they speak and act."<sup>27</sup> What Moltmann is emphasizing here is a simultaneous outworking of divine authority through the gathered community and through individuals, which he defines as a *genetic connection*. "The Spirit leads men and women into the fellowship of the messianic people, at the same time giving everyone his own place and his particular charge."<sup>28</sup>

Moltmann's interpretation of authority exercised within the charismatic community is specifically pneumatological. The Spirit must be given full freedom to reign within the community of the church, distributing his authority through the individual and through the community as a whole. Consequently, there can be no fixed pattern by which the will of God is accomplished within each community. This does not mean, of course, that there are no norms for community life: Moltmann specifically

26. Banks, *Paul's Idea of Community*, 170, author's italics.

27. Moltmann, *Church in the Power of Spirit*, 303, my italics.

28. Ibid., 306.

identifies *kerygma*, *koinonia*, and *diakonia* as essential elements of all that the church is called to be. But in the performance of these essential "commissions of the community," we must acknowledge the inventiveness and ingenuity of the Spirit, who alone "constitutes" the church, to use the terminology of John Zizioulas, for whom "pneumatology does not refer to the well-being but to the very being of the Church."<sup>29</sup>

This simultaneous exercise of authority can only take place if all members of the community recognise their dependence not only on one another but also on the Holy Spirit. Only the Spirit has the wisdom and power to orchestrate a community of individuals in such a way as to mediate divine authority in the service of the kingdom of God. Only the Spirit can enable congregational members to "be like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose" (Phil 2:2). Tradition, party spirit, and prejudice may all contribute to a false, even destructive, exercise of authority, but where there is genuine humility and an openness to listen to the voice of the Spirit, the church will challenge the world's perception of authority and present a way of life that reflects the true diaconal nature of authority. This has been likened by Tickle to what mathematicians and physicists call "network theory," in which every part contributes to the whole in a self-organizing system of relations in a dynamic and evolving structure: "The duty, the challenge, the joy and excitement of the Church and for the Christians who compose her, then, is in discovering what it means to believe that the kingdom of God is within one, and in understanding that one is thereby a pulsating, vibrant bit in a much grander network."<sup>30</sup>

## Listening Leadership

In an earlier discussion of what has come to be known as "receptive ecumenism" (chapter 6) I commented that the notion of *listening* to others is very much on the ecumenical agenda today. Before exploring receptive ecumenism further, along with another innovative concept in practical theology known as "ordinary theology" and some further more specific reflections on the role of leadership in Appreciative Inquiry, a few words on listening are in order. A few years ago I planned to write a book with the title *Listening Leadership*, highlighting leaders as those who not only

29. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, 132.

30. Tickle, *Great Emergence*, 152–53.

listen to God (a given, one would hope!) but who also listen to their congregation, or other community group, whatever that might be—unfortunately I have never managed to find the time to develop my ideas on the subject. In my working framework I identified a number of critical dimensions of “listening leadership,” focusing specifically on a leader who is *discerning* (a key aspect of listening), *decisive* (good at making decisions), and good at *delegating* (so critically involving others, discerning how they might be inspired and drawn in). Spiritual discernment, decisiveness, and the ability to delegate are, I suggest, critical attributes of a leader who seeks to operate within the sort of communal “participatory society” that I am advocating. My emphasis was therefore going to be on leaders who are recognized because they actually listen with discernment both to God in their personal lives, and also to the revelations of the Spirit amongst the people. Then, with decisiveness, they draw people into the outworking of that which has been discerned (the delegation part).

The point I am making here is that the willingness and capacity to listen is a key attribute of leadership and cannot be underestimated. The Appreciative Inquiry (AI) model of change and growth discussed earlier in the context of congregational life is itself grounded in empathic listening, representing perhaps the most critical dimension of what Gil Rendle and Alice Mann call ‘holy conversations.’ These are conversations structured around “what a group of people believe God calls them to be or to do,”<sup>31</sup> thus honoring the insights and wisdom of congregational members. Wise leadership understands Appreciative Inquiry as a *congregational* process that seeks to listen to the voice of the community of God’s people as a means of discerning God’s direction. If the church is to draw its identity and shape from the Trinity, seeking to image the communion life of God in its structure and practices, then ecclesial leadership structures will necessarily be shaped by inclusiveness, interdependence, and cooperation. Using a cosmic analogy, Leonardo Boff suggests that the “solar mystery of perichoretic communion in the Trinity sheds light on the lunar mystery of the church.”<sup>32</sup> His “communion-perichoresis” vision of the Trinity leads to “a vision of a church that is more communion than hierarchy, more service than power, more circular than pyramidal, more loving embrace than bending the knee before authority.”<sup>33</sup>

31. Rendle and Mann, *Holy Conversations*, 3.

32. Boff, *Trinity and Society*, 153.

33. *Ibid.*, 154.

Human beings are often inclined to frame things in terms of hierarchy: instead of viewing A in *relation* to B, our natural preference is to view A in *comparison* to B, from which perspective we derive description, direction, and purpose. We therefore find ourselves attributing greater value to some ministries than others, which can easily lead to the devaluation of some people, whilst others are given an exalted status.<sup>34</sup> What is needed is a theology of the body of Christ, as spelled out by Paul in 1 Cor 12:12–26, in which we value the “least” member, and encourage all parts to work together. In this respect, Appreciative Inquiry values the stories, memories, and hopes of *everyone* in the body of Christ, and leadership’s role is to facilitate the art of listening in order to draw out these stories, valuing them as critical to the health of the whole body. This way of thinking *does not eliminate hierarchy*—indeed, as suggested earlier in this chapter, hierarchy is integral to the ordering of physical and social reality. Specifically, in local church life *all* ministries, including the ministry of leadership, “inhere in each other, emerge out of each other, generate new ecclesial order and enable transformation in social practice. The critical element in this transformative work is the role of human agency seeking to participate in the work of the Spirit.”<sup>35</sup>

We noted earlier that the Spirit is—or, rather, should be!—the creative power and life-energy in all ecclesial structures. As we yield the AI process to the Holy Spirit, we should expect to discern the Spirit’s voice amongst God’s people. This calls for wisdom in leadership, as there is a creative tension in Appreciative Inquiry between the Spirit’s agenda (expressed in terms of revelation) and human agendas. How can we be sure that we are hearing the voice of the Spirit amidst the myriad human voices contributing to AI’s “holy conversations”? From a philosophical perspective, social constructionism, an underlying theoretical premise undergirding AI, argues that social reality is constructed out of different human contexts. Social constructionists would say, for example, that reality arises “from below,” rejecting the notion that reality is objectively determined and independent of human influence. At first glance this would seem to conflict with the notion of the authority of the Spirit within a Christian understanding of reality. However, Christians can, up to a certain point, have their constructionist cake and eat it too, because constructionism has to do with *our perception* of reality, rather than its

34. I am grateful for this insight to Elizabeth Smith, a graduate student in my Summer 2003 class at Fuller Theological Seminary.

35. Pickard, *Seeking the Church*, 164.



objective, ontological being. As Branson notes, the “focus here is epistemology (how do we know), not ontology (the nature of reality as studied in metaphysics).”<sup>36</sup> The key here is *language*: “We live our lives within a construct—a world created in our minds through language. . . . We use discourse—ongoing, thorough conversation—to make social meaning out of our pasts, to imagine possible futures, and to form cooperative practices.”<sup>37</sup>

In our finitude, we are limited in our knowledge and understanding. We all use symbols, metaphors, and stories in order to communicate our understanding of what we see around us, and one of leadership’s roles in congregational life is, through sensitive and careful listening, to discover meaning through the *language* that people use to express that understanding. Wise leadership will recognize that personal narratives occur within specific settings, thus giving contextual shape to what is shared, and that these narratives need to be filtered through a process of spiritual discernment, listening for “the still small voice that beckons us onward, quietly revealing what we are here on earth to do and to become.”<sup>38</sup> The Spirit authenticates the will and presence of God not in a one-size-fits-all toolkit for congregational action, but in unique church contexts that enable us all to bring to the table our own longings, hopes, and desires: we are invited to offer our stories as spiritual gifts for the benefit of the whole community. Through this listening process, leadership’s role is to reconnect us thankfully to God’s narrative of grace amongst us, generating hope for the future.

### Receptive Ecumenism

In chapter 6 I observed that the notion of listening to others is very much on the ecumenical agenda today. As Paul Fiddes remarked in a paper delivered in the UK in 2007, the point of what has come to be known as “receptive ecumenism” is “to allow ‘learning’ to take precedence over ‘teaching,’ to move from an attitude of defensiveness to . . . attention to the other.”<sup>39</sup> In the words of Paul Murray: “What can we learn, or receive, with integrity from our various others in order to facilitate our own

36. Branson, *Memories*, 37.

37. *Ibid.*, 37.

38. Rendle and Mann, *Holy Conversations*, 139.

39. Fiddes, “Learning from Others,” 54.



growth together into deepened communion in Christ and the Spirit?"<sup>40</sup> It would seem that the primary goal of receptive ecumenism as elucidated in a number of conferences and discussions around the world is to facilitate a greater awareness of the need to listen to one another within the framework of national or denominational church structures. And that perhaps is where the primary effort amongst Christian leaders may be focused in the future. However, receptive ecumenism may prove to offer useful contributions to the issue of leadership in *local congregations*. Geoff Moore, a professor of business ethics at Durham University, UK (where much work is being done in the field of receptive ecumenism studies) is a member of the "Receptive Ecumenism and Local Church" research project in the north of England. One of the research areas in which he is involved is "leadership and ministry," which is looking at the role of ordained ministers—their leadership styles and how appropriate they are for the different denominations. A "learning and formation" group was set up to address issues such as the formation of laity and ordained in congregational life, including ministerial training. It is already clear from the work of the research team that because of financial pressures on local churches more and more lay people are becoming involved in church leadership and ministry. This is being worked out in different ways in the different denominational settings being studied. So key questions arise: what can each denomination learn from other denominations, and what can individual local churches learn from other churches grappling with similar problems? In Moore's view, if receptive ecumenism fails to have an impact on local church life, the project will have failed.<sup>41</sup>

Receptive ecumenism's promise is grounded in a willingness to listen to those who may have something to offer regarding how we "do church." In the context of the present chapter, it suggests that those who are involved in specific leadership roles may find resources to help them as they seek to encourage and enable the local congregation of God's people to live out its calling in the local community of which it is a part. "Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear" (Mark 4:9). In chapter 6, I recounted my experience of walking along a country lane in England, disturbed by a claim made by one particular denominational group that they were the "new breed" of Christians through whom God would fulfil his eschatological purposes in the world. As I stood under a large tree

40. Murray, "Receptive Ecumenism," 279–80.

41. Moore, "A Fuller Unity."

with spreading branches, I was heartened by the realization that each branch was different, yet the same sap was flowing through each one, eventually to turn bud into leaf. So God delights to express himself in glorious diversity in the life of his church, with each local church having the potential to offer a gift to the whole church. In God's kingdom there is no place for the arrogant for whom listening is a wasted exercise because they have a monopoly on discerning how God has spoken. The simple truth is that we all need to listen to one another, an insight that may be likened to the giving and receiving of pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, as suggested by the rabbi Lawrence Kushner:

Each lifetime is the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle.  
 For some there are more pieces.  
 For others the puzzle is more difficult to assemble.  
 Some seem to be born with a nearly completed puzzle . . .  
 . . . But know this. No one has within themselves  
 All the pieces to their puzzle . . .  
 . . . Everyone carries with them at least one and probably  
 Many pieces to someone else's puzzle.  
 Sometimes they know it.  
 Sometimes they don't.  
 And when you present your piece . . .  
 . . . To another, whether you know it or not,  
 Whether they know it or not,  
 You are a messenger from the Most High.<sup>42</sup>

"No one has within themselves all the pieces to their puzzle." This is a refrain that lies at the heart of all church life, and, if the truth be known, local church life *is* a puzzle—frustratingly, perplexingly, and at times gloriously so! The lesson of this chapter is that congregational life is necessarily fluid and adaptive if it is to accommodate to the surprising initiatives of the Spirit, whose voice both lay and ordained seek to discern as they listen to one another.

42. Kushner, *Honey from the Rock*, 69–70.

## Ordinary Theology

"Ordinary theology" has been defined as "the theology and theologising of those who speak of God reflectively, but who have received little or no theological education of a scholarly, academic or systematic kind."<sup>43</sup> In his earlier pioneering development of the concept, Jeff Astley, who coined the phrase, describes it as "the theological beliefs and processes of believing that find expression in the God-talk of those believers who have received no scholarly theological education."<sup>44</sup> Ordinary theology takes seriously the voice of the people, a voice that is not easily discernible because the reality in which many people live out their faith is an ambiguous one, containing many themes, ideas, and concepts that jostle alongside each other, often in contradictory ways. How, then, can we penetrate this hybrid "polydox" nature of religious belief and experience? The obvious answer is that we need to listen more attentively to the reflective God-talk that is going on around us all the time; as Astley points out in *Exploring Ordinary Theology*, normal pastoral conversations and alert, empathetic, and intelligent observations can already tell us a great deal about what people believe—about salvation, eschatology, the meaning of sin, and the nature of the church, for example.<sup>45</sup> Astley's conviction is that if we truly listen to what ordinary theologians are saying—"listening up" and listening in depth—and follow this with probing questions, seeking to understand the connections they are making in their "God-talk," then it will be possible to propose a "theology of ordinary theology," in which the claims of "ordinary theology" are challenged, the norms of academic theology enriched, and its own assumptions perhaps similarly challenged.

Clearly, there are points of convergence between Appreciate Inquiry and ordinary theology as both approaches value listening to those whose voice is often submerged beneath the multiple voices of leaders, scholars, and teachers who are frequently regarded as the experts on matters of faith and belief, whether in the local church context or in the wider Christian community. Again, the mantra of "both-and" needs to be emphasized here, ensuring that in our haste to acknowledge the legitimacy of "people's often halting, unsystematic, and poorly-expressed words

43. Christie and Astley, "Ordinary Soteriology," 177.

44. Astley, *Ordinary Theology*, 1.

45. Astley and Francis, *Exploring Ordinary Theology*, especially chapter 1.

about their faith”<sup>46</sup> we do not downgrade the contribution of those whose scholarly or leadership gifts have much to offer for the enrichment of congregational life.

46. Francis et al., *Empirical Theology*, 179.