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Why 'Doing Good in the Community' Is Both a Good and a Bad Idea: The Congregation as the Hermeneutic of the Gospel and Public Trust

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Abstract: The theme of the current Special Issue, 'Faith in Action: Examining the Power and Purpose of a Public Theology in Contemporary Society', leaves a lot of scope for definition. Here, the theme is addressed via the lens of the public life and practice of a Christian congregation and its generative qualities pertaining to public trust. Such an approach contrasts with more formal public theologies which tend to favour intellectual or academic discourse. It will be argued that the life of a local faith community and its embodied public interface provides a better starting point as it can be seen as the most directly presupposed concrete and public context of the phrase 'faith in action'. As an analytical conduit, the congregation is a neglected category for rendering a public theology, even as it lies at the heart of the Christian faith's constitutive practice. Here, a particular form of public exchange drawn from local experience will be set against the background of the recent trend in ecclesiology to turn away from abstracted notions of the church towards more practice-orientated understandings. The dynamics of developing public trust will be considered through reflection on an oft repeated response offered from non-practicing observers of my local church's work: 'You do so much good in the community'. Although a seemingly simple (and positive) sentiment, such a comment in fact bears complex layers of meaning and subtextual inflections to which a minister and congregation might give heed in search of public trust.

Keywords: congregation; trust; practice; gospel

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1. Introduction

Since its early beginnings in the thought of Martin Marty, Max Stackhouse, and others, who discerned a need for the church to engage more concertedly and intentionally with contemporary issues and contribute to the common good, 'public theology' has drawn to itself an array of meanings. It remains a somewhat slippery and contested term, used variously with shifting emphases. Denise Ackerman notes that '[t]here are different understandings of what is meant by public theology' (Ackerman 2017, p. 104), a sentiment echoed by Harold Breitenberg who enquires '[w]ill the real public theology please stand up?' (Breitenberg 2003, p. 56). Alternatively, believing that public theology had acquired unhelpful accommodationist tendencies making too many concessions to the church's surrounding culture, Charles Mathewes has argued instead for a 'theology of public life' (Mathewes 2007).

What can be said is that public theology looks especially to engagement amid the liminal and complex space that sits between the church and the discourses of wider society. In its most recognizable form, it is, in Kevin Vanhoozer's words, 'theologically informed

discourse aimed at the general public' (Vanhoozer and Strachan 2015, pp. 18–19). Much public theology has been performed through the academy, with professional theologians leading the way, but greater attention is now being paid to a neglected context of public theological reflection, the congregation. Communally, a congregation bears its own story and history. It embodies its theology in practice at the crossroads of intersecting public domains. It is constantly asking questions which pertain to its public presence and conversely being challenged with them by a range of interlocutors. Its public trustworthiness across a range of issues is being frequently tested.

A congregation's theological 'publicness' ought not to be seen as an arbitrary or irrelevant consequence of its practice, or a benign by-product of its concreteness. Rather, it is a precipice of exchange which may be approached with greater or lesser levels of intentionality, and may offer fertile ground for a (re)consideration of 'the power and purpose of a public theology in contemporary society'. Drawn not from the halls of academia, but from the located practice of a company of God's people, a congregation sits, perhaps, somewhere between the conventional definition of public theology and Mathewes' theology of public life. It represents a middle ground for analytical purposes drawing on personal experience as well as biblical and theological reflection and will form the primary locus of consideration in this article.

A congregation also appears best placed to address one of the most pressing issues for the church in our time pertaining to faith in action, the decline of public trust (more generally in society at large, and society's trust in the church itself), for trust grows through embodied relationships, over time, locally in the first instance, but with wider overtones. Here, it will be argued that developing and deepening trust is a pressing public concern for the church, as well as a subtle and complex relational calling. It would be overstating the case to draw too sharp a distinction between theoretical and practical elements of public theology; as a discrete discourse, it incorporates both, as one might expect. Nevertheless, as all theology is ultimately an exercise of the church and so an expression of faith across the realms of body–mind–spirit, there is benefit in centring the church's practice in order to reflect on the dynamics of its publicness. To do so is to recognize, among other things, that in a skeptical time where the church's public position is far more tenuous than it once was, trust is more likely to correspond to what the church *does* and how it *lives*, than what it *says*.

2. Hermeneutic of the Gospel

It would be easy to imagine that the primary public face of a Protestant Christian denomination is to be found in representative roles in the wider polity. Non-episcopal churches regularly maintain moderators, presidents, general secretaries who assume the public voice of the church. In one sense, this is perfectly understandable. Figureheads bear representative responsibility afforded to them juridically by church regulations and structures of governance. Synods, Presbyteries, and assemblies need to be overseen, and as they are generally the governing councils for a denomination the natural consequence is to see their key figures as the most important public representatives. They are also structurally the ecclesial instruments most closely aligned in comparative terms with business and organizational leaders (CEOs and Chairpersons of Boards, etc.) meaning that the wider community more readily imagines them as the responsible parties for the churches they represent.

In the Reformed/evangelical tradition, however, Lesslie Newbigin describes the church's primary public face as expressed in the local congregation (that is, the local assembly of believers gathered around Word and Sacrament, serving and witnessing to its community). Newbigin calls the congregation the 'hermeneutic of the Gospel' (Newbigin 1989, p. 225). By this, he means that

> the primary reality of which we have to take account in seeking for a Christian impact on public life is the Christian congregation. How is it possible that the Gospel should be credible, that people should come to believe that the power which has the last word in human affairs is represented by a man hanging on a cross? I am suggesting that the only answer, the only hermeneutic of the Gospel is a congregation of men and women who believe it and live by it. I am, of course, not denying the importance of the many activities by which we seek to challenge public life with the Gospel–evangelistic campaigns, distribution of bibles, and Christian literature, conferences, and even books such as this one. But I am saying that these are all secondary, and that they have power to accomplish their purposes only as they are rooted in and lead back to a believing community. (Newbigin 1989, p. 225)

Newbigin eschews all else in favour of the congregation as the principal vehicle of the church's public presence. In this case, the public face of the church is communal rather than individual. It is dependent in the first place on a visible network of relationality enacting a certain way of being in the sight of the wider world (contrasting with perspectives more aligned with, say, Max Weber's theory of charismatic personality). And critically, he associates the Gospel's credibility with the performance of the faith as it is embodied in a congregation's people (rather than the pronouncements or personal charisma of its leader/s). Another way of putting this sentiment would be to say that it is the congregation which has in its power, more so than any other dimension of the church, the ability to grow trustworthiness: trustworthiness for the church in the eyes of others, trustworthiness as to the performance of the apostolic faith, and public trustworthiness or credibility of the Christian confessional data itself—the Gospel. Such a view accords with Kevin Vanhoozer's assertion that 'in the final analysis, the best apologetic is the people of God doing communion and performing works of love to the world, demonstrating the truth of what is, and what will be, in Christ' (Vanhoozer and Strachan 2015, p. 176). For Vanhoozer, the pastoral ministry needs to be 'reclaimed' as the vocation of a 'public theologian', something he describes as a 'lost vision'. In parallel, it is time to reclaim the congregation as the hermeneutic of the Gospel and the corporate vehicle of the church's public credibility.

Public theologies regularly jump immediately to the public arena in search of connection points. Higher-level discourses or public responses to political events are assumed to be suitable to carry the necessary elements of a church's public voice. But reconsideration of the congregation shifts this emphasis, placing the classic form of Christian community as the central, visible conduit of public engagement. By doing so, the church's trustworthiness is anticipated to be generated in sacramental and evangelical local practice, with relationships grown through loving openness, rather than in wider dialogues fronted by individual ecclesial leaders. Such dialogues have a place, of course, and much good can result from them, but in terms of the fullness of a Gospel witness, a congregation retains a legitimacy that is unsurpassed. In part, this is so because it offers a hospitable place of welcome. Thus, its public presence makes room for the possibility of new relationships in which neighbours can find a receptive welcome into a flesh-and-blood community. As such, unusually, the church's vocation for the sake of public trust is drawn into the orbit of ecclesiology. But it is ecclesiology that must 'go local' if the congregation in concrete reality, not just an ideal of a congregation, is to be centred. I will here seek to reflect on my own congregational experience as a Minister of the Word and what it means in practice to seek public trust, but first I will note how trends in ecclesiology over the past half century aid this process.

3. Ecclesiology in Practice

As a backdrop to this conversation, it is helpful to chart a little of the movements in ecclesiological reflection. In recent years, ecclesiology has, in Ulrich Schmiedel's words, 'turned to practice' (Schmiedel 2017, p. 197), revealing a confluence with the trajectory of public theology itself. Turning to something means turning away from something else, and in this case the 'something else' is more abstract or theorized notions of the church. Today, conversations that eschew the church's concrete life are out of step with the integrated trajectories that began to be more evident in the work of practical theologians Edward Farley, Rebecca Chopp, Don Browning, and Craig Dykstra in the 1980s and 1990s. Indeed, practical theology as a discrete discourse has been developed via an awareness that ecclesiology needed to be brought down out of the clouds and into the streets and public squares in which the visible church is located.

Ecclesiology and practical theology have found common ground here along with multiple points of connection. Such trajectories have the hall-mark of construing ecclesiology, ministry, and theological education as a circular exercise where practice and reflection/construction are mutually informing and in a constant state of inter-play. Schmiedel identifies the renewed realization that what is actually performed in church communities (preaching, liturgy, service, witness, pastoral care, the very presence of particular 'bodies' together in a space and all they represent and imply (see McClintock Fulkerson 2019, pp. 98–101; Mai-Anh Le Tran 2019, pp. 129–31)) provides a better starting point for conversations around the nature of the church—and so its pretensions to trustworthiness—than detached models. Cheryl Peterson describes this standpoint as an ecclesiology 'from below', one which she deploys as she describes her Spirit-animated ecclesiology (Peterson 2013, p. 5). This turn to practice is important from the point of view of trust, as in any trust system, word and deed must be congruent and seen to be congruent to be considered credible. Before the substantive content of such praxis is evaluated, the presumption of alignment between speech and action is a given.

The church's self-identification, it is argued, should coalesce with what *happens* week to week in prayer and worship, discipleship, and community. Communities of faith learn what it means to hold together concretely amid the angularities of communal life, not in imagined ideals of what the church *ought* to be. Across relationships, diversity, difference, and intersections with a raft of 'publics', the church professes and practises its faith, making it what it is—the Body of Christ—as a literal, corporeal *body* or *company* journeying together through time. The historical reality of the church cannot be separated from projected ideals (theological or otherwise). The church's thinking must reflect its doing.

Further distinctions unfold. Peterson rightly identifies that 'theological investigation into the church's identity cannot be done in a social and historical vacuum' (Peterson 2013, p. 4). Contextual engagement demands analytical sophistication and subtlety and a sensitivity to the nuances of cultural expression. The people of God are always 'situated', taking on different forms relative to time and place. 'The church' in that sense requires further definition: Which church? Where? In what time? For whom? In what form? Additionally, as Dykstra has noted, the embodied practice of Christian communities can 'bear epistemological weight' and 'give rise to new knowledge' (Dykstra 2019, pp. 313–30). People learn what it means to be the church as they participate in its life, which in turn prompts deeper reflection on the nature and purpose of that life and how it is practised. Becoming trustworthy in Christ is a life-long calling personally and communally. The circle of integrative praxis continues to spin. Communities of disciples are surprised, challenged, and re-constituted by the Spirit week to week, giving the church a dynamic rather than static personality. At all points, then, ecclesiology presupposes, in some form,

active congregations of God's people gathered around Word and Sacrament, participating in the ministry of Christ in the world.

Such an entry point exposes what Nicholas Healy calls 'blueprint' ecclesiologies (Healy 2000, pp. 25–51) as inadequate precisely because of their epistemological detachment from lived reality. Unhelpful consequences can flow, one being the idealization of the church, setting it above what Hauerwas calls the 'rough and tumble of historical particularity' (Hauerwas 2020, online seminar) in which it must exist to be true to its calling. Healy believes rather that it is the church's 'agency' as opposed to its 'being' which provides the initial ground for description (cited in Peterson 2013, p. 5). To draw an analogy from the church's Eucharistic practice, at issue is the difference between describing the bread and wine of communion in some projected, idealized way, rather than partaking in the holy meal itself as sacramental enactment by which the church rehearses its own story. Ecclesiology must incorporate more than the cerebral. It must embrace—indeed, emerges from—ecclesial experience in the Body of Christ, itself a metaphor with obvious resonances along such lines. Bodies are fleshly and three-dimensional, acted upon by a raft of environmental factors, and material, situated and provisional, subject to decay and groaning inwardly and outwardly, or they are not bodies at all. Being in the church together requires the practice of forgiveness, not simply reflection on the nature of forgiveness. The Gospel requires concrete acts of love when it is hard, not only speculation on the meaning of love. 'However it is defined in detail', Schmiedel writes, 'practice is what constitutes the church' (Schmiedel 2017, p. 226). Public trust in the church will not be garnered by blueprints set down in academic journals or monographs intended primarily for consumption by a limited theological cohort.

Practice, so the argument goes, then, provides the appropriate domain in which to ground ecclesiological reflection. As Schmiedel argues, 'Practice. . . is interpreted not as the *consequence* but as the *condition* for identity' (Schmiedel 2017, p. 197), a view supported in a broad sense by Healy's argument that 'ecclesiology is better thought of as more of a practical and prophetic discipline than a speculative and systematic one' (Healy 2000, p. 21). So it goes with trust. Practice is the condition for trust, not the consequence of it, although trust itself of course can encourage deeper and more co-operative practice. There is, for Schmiedel then, a 'performative power of practice' (Schmiedel 2017, p. 197) that affords it its place in the hierarchy of methodological departure points. 'Church', Schmiedel argues, 'is done rather than described' (Schmiedel 2017, p. 258). It is 'performative project' rather than a 'propositional possession' (Schmiedel 2017, p. 263).

Such a stance is not to preclude the place of deeper thought and theological articulation, on the contrary. Schmiedel identifies in the ecclesiologies of John Milbank, Pete Ward and Graham Ward, that theology (faith seeking understanding) itself is a practice that, when fulfilling its most ancient mandate, is intimately connected with 'what actually happens' in Christian communities and across polities. Reflection on Scripture, prayer, thought, action all holds together in the Christian life, and is earthed place to place. St Paul's letters are sometimes looked on as dry theological treatises but, approached from the intent of their author, they are directed to the church's embodied life with all its variety and challenges. They are looking to form a people of prayer and praise with right understanding—lex orandi, lex credendi—and so a trustworthy hermeneutic of the Gospel. Thought and practice (like prayer and service) are not separated, but integrated realities of a people seeking to follow Christ. And indeed when Paul sought to commend himself to his fledgling communities as *the* trustworthy guide for their lives, he pointed to his practice which included preaching, prayer, presence, and participation in their lives.

From the point of view of the search for a rounded and faithful ecclesiological perspective that might generate credibility, there is much to commend the renewed interest in

practice. It offers a necessary corrective to blueprint theologies and re-focuses the church's attention to the heart of its confessional and devotional performance. It is in that practice that others might see that the church believes what it preaches and preaches (and practices) what it believes as it is situated place to place in concrete expression—habits crucial to nurturing a trustworthy public persona.

This is not to say that, as a construct, 'practice' does not require further definition or critique. It too has come under scrutiny and different forms of contestation. Pete Ward has noted that practice is conditioned by a swathe of intersecting pre-concerns which govern the church's life (Ward 2017, p. 4). Congregational practice is not just any pattern of actions habitually embraced by a cohort of people. The practice of the church *can* be understood generically as a phenomenon reflective of an embodied way of life in general. On this basis, 'practice' is found in all religious traditions, but cannot speak to greater specificity. By contrast, however, a more specific rendering draws into those actions that constitute the church's particular identity. As Peterson identifies, the church 'needs to be a certain kind of community of people' (Peterson 2013, p. 5), not a generic gathering shorn of its peculiar identity-forming ways. In doing so, she also recognizes that a potential downside of the 'turn to practice' is the risk of shifting the emphasis from what the Triune God does for the world in and through Christ and his completed work, via the Holy Spirit, to 'what the members do' (Peterson 2013, p. 6). In Reformed understanding, the church maintains its status as creatura verbi—a creature of the Word, meaning God is always at the centre. The character and identity of the church must be intimately entwined with the ongoing ministry of Christ for it truly to *be* the church. Historically, the church has stipulated that to do so requires it to bear the marks of the continuing apostolic faith in a trustworthy manner, that is, as they have been handed down. As the Reformed tradition has always reckoned it, the 'marks of the church' (notae ecclesia), are the Word rightly preached and the sacrament properly administered set within the common life of the company of faith. In these actions, the Word of God is the primary actor through whom the sacramental, enfleshed signs are rendered, making for the 'practice of the church' and that by which it can be visibly and publicly recognized as such.

For Christians, then, 'practice' encompasses a range of particular and sacramental 'practices' by which its life is marked, by which its unique identity is patterned, and in which its members participate routinely. But it should not be overlooked that these are *public* practices at the same time. They bear a public face that speaks of a certain confessional commitment to the world. This is Schmiedel's 'performative power of practice' as revealed in the church's longstanding way. It is 'public practice' and so resides in the landscape of trust-making actions. Practice is informed by the Scriptural witness first and foremost, necessitating a community of the Word ready to read and listen, including listening to the world. The church must have a clear sense of what it is and how it is directed and governed if it is to exist faithfully. It seeks this direction via its inspired text. Its practice is not de-tethered from a regulating norm but rather must accord with it, meaning that Scriptural reading is a necessary aspect of its credibility. For Christians, these more specific practices are understood as embodied signs of the love of God which, by grace, effect that which they signify. They become in Rowan Williams' terms 'tokens of trust' whereby God's promises are rehearsed, re-named, re-capitulated, and re-embodied. They become tokens of trust with a dual-facing aspect: to the church as it recognizably and universally accepted sacramental actions, and to the wider world as representations of the Gospel the church professes.

Equally, feminist and cross-cultural practitioners have argued that as 'church' historically has presupposed and privileged mostly male (and in the West, mostly Anglo-Saxon) voices, so 'practice' can smuggle in similar biases if it is not checked and recalibrated by

the foregrounding of 'other/ed' personal confessional narratives (Miller-McLemore 2019, p. 314). As a hermeneutic of the Gospel, the Gospel itself is always critiquing the prejudices that seep into congregational life on the back of human social and cultural fragilities. A trustworthy congregation is always in the mode of self-critique as informed by the Scriptural way which regulates it out of its tacit and explicit biases. The Gospel of the church's own preaching is its fiercest critical force.

Additionally, in the technologically advanced era, questions emerge around how practice is affected by what Elizabeth Drescher calls a 'digital ecclesiology' (cited in Campbell 2020, p. 1). Can the digital space where communicants are set behind screens and so not bodily present with each other really be considered 'Christian community' in the way the church has always understood? Can Eucharist be shared without a 'common cup and common bread' with participants separated and detached from one another? Questions abound around the limits of practice which affect how the church inhabits trustworthiness to its tradition while also seeking to garner public trust.

Schmiedel's performative power of (public) practice is not revealed in homogenous expectations of what the church will be, nor in fully predictable particulars of the church's witness and service, even amid accepted sacramental/evangelical markers. Practice proffers a diffuse kind of power revealed more multi-dimensionally than singularly which flow from *the* practices of the church, but are earthed differently person to person, place to place. Such practice is borne in communities of significant internal and external difference. Situated relationality, then, and the dynamics thereof in embodied patterns of action and behaviour bear their own potentiality and necessitate reflection on their own trust networks. Working with the ecclesiology of Graham Ward, Schmiedel recognizes that the paradox of practice resides in the positive embrace of alterity—first of the God who is beyond, and yet with humanity, and secondly in the diversity of the church's community, internal and external. For Schmiedel, '*Experientially*, the exposure to the finite other [other human beings] and the exposure to the infinite other [God] are *structurally similar*'. The 'infinite' and 'finite' other, to use Schmiedel's terms, maintain a structural similarity in that they destabilize and stabilize relationality at the same time through transcendence (my experience of another who is different to me and the consequent effects on me—transformation in some form), and so necessitate trust if faithful practice is to flourish (Schmiedel 2017, p. 78). Any engagement with another means I must relinquish a sense of complete control over the space between us and so must make myself open to being changed. Schmiedel argues that '[t]he transformative transcendence of trust in the finite other is connected to how one encounters the infinite other and the transformative transcendence of trust in the infinite other is connected to how one encounters the finite other' (Schmiedel 2017, p. 262). Hence, in the church, engagement with difference/alterity 'should be at the core of the practices of the church' (Schmiedel 2017, p. 262). Put another way, the miracle of the church is that through the Body of Christ, practice results in both fracture and cohesion at the same time in the swirling milieu of humanity who seek to love God and neighbour, to listen, and be changed; like the bread at communion, the church is both blessed and broken, but importantly, in its entirety given for the sake of the world. The turn to practice beckons to specific congregational experience. If the congregation is the 'hermeneutic of the Gospel', enacting the 'performative power of practice' for the sake of public credibility and trustworthiness, it is to a congregation we must turn.

4. To the Practice of My Congregation—A Diverse and Listening People

In a busy and active congregation, I am always filtering comments and happenings within and beyond the church community itself. Listening, curiosity, and openness go hand in hand for an attentive pastor (and congregation at large), indicative of Matthew

Kaemingk's sense of trustworthy public posture requiring, 'listening', 'speech', and 'persuasion' (Kaemingk 2021, p. 5) for the sake of faithful ministry. If, as Greg Okesson has argued, '[e]ach local congregation is a sent community into the fullness of the world' as a 'public witness' to 'share [its] public nature with the people and publics surrounding the community' (Okesson 2020, p. 119), it must consider deeply how it presents a trustworthy face and lives as a healthy body in relationship with the finite and infinite other. Congregational discernment of such realities is an abiding aspect of its calling and is critical in a time where trust, both more broadly amid Western society and especially the public's trust in the church, has been declining.

The purpose, then, of a congregation's ongoing interpretive consideration centres around what it means to cultivate trust: trust internally, trust externally, and trust across diverse wider constituencies. It is possible of course to speak of personal trustworthiness associated with individual congregational members, ministers, or workers; this has its place. The personal context forms the atomized element of the communal and so contributes to that broader picture of trust that is being formed. But there is also the question of how a community of faith becomes a trustworthy body, building up reservoirs of trust in its relating with others (persons, institutions, wider organizations). That these two dimensions inform each other stands to reason, but the call of the congregation must move beyond individualism to ask how it cultivates trust in its corporate sense. Such a priority foregrounds questions about the dynamics of trust in pastoral perspective and forms the immediate consideration of this article.

Firstly, building trust begins with a church's basic public posture beyond itself. It might seem self-evident to suggest that a congregation is what Okesson calls a 'kind of public', that consists of a '*common space of togetherness where people participate with one another in life and form opinions through the circulation of different texts*' (Okesson 2020, p. 119, italics original), but if the 'public' of the congregation is curved in on itself—to invoke Luther—its networks of trust will remain limited to its confessional cohort. Pastoral openness beyond the public of the congregation to other intersecting realms arises, conversely, via an assumption about where God might be at work in the world and how Christ's followers might be encouraged to participate in what God is already doing. God is beyond the church even as the church's being is dependent on God. Clive Marsh has written of how the church must always be in a state of mind to 'receive Christ back from the world', emphasizing that 'Christ is not contained in or by the church, and frequently challenges us in many different contexts in daily living'. For Marsh, 'receiv[ing] Christ back from the world is crucial if, as Christians claim, Christ is not identical to the church, and God in Christ is present and at work in the world. In short, it is [the church] who are to be shaped by Christ, through our discovery of Christ in and through others' (Marsh 2006, p. 156).

For Protestants, then, a stance of participatio Christi rather than imitatio Christi reduces undue emphasis on human agency in order to accent and foreground God's; what Christ's followers do is respond to God's already present activity by working in the stream of the expansive and abundant divine love which is constantly being poured out in the world. Where God is, so Christ's disciples should be; where God calls, so they should follow and serve; where God reveals need and suffering, so they should offer a holy presence in whatever form is contextually appropriate. A congregation's vocation demands a trustworthy public presence seeking after Christ via relationships that draw it outwards.

Secondly, there is always a need to be aware of how the church's message and ministry are being received—proverbially to have one's 'ear to the ground' so as to engage thoughtfully in public dialogue of whatever form and adjust one's language and tone accordingly. Discerning the receptivity of a context is important as no ministry exists in a cultural or historical vacuum. Postmodern reflection has confirmed that there is no neutral, objective

interpretive space. Everyone is situated 'somewhere' amid histories and trajectories, all with complexities that particularize the dynamics of existence. Trust itself does not arise generically, but within networks of embodied relationships within time. Questions thus tumble forward to which the congregation and its minister might address themselves if a public trust is to be sought. Is the church's voice trusted in the wider world and local context, and what are the dynamics that make it so (or not)? Is it greeted with suspicion for some reason/s? Is it a curiosity but little more, suggesting little connection? Is it an object of scorn or indifference, perhaps due to thoughtless public displays or patronizing speech? Is there healing to take place or reconciliation in certain quarters? Does congregation then have connections with civic and business leaders in its area? Such questions keep a congregation attuned to the events and attitudes of its neighbourhood and society at large and so in a position to discern how and why trust (or distrust) is operating. It also facilities a kind of public accountability for the congregation reflected in the nature of attitudes it gleans from wider discourse. Between the two rationales of openness (both to the world and to God) and awareness of receptivity, the pastor's and the congregation's missional imagination goes to work in concrete, theologically animated engagement.

The multi-dimensional nature of a congregation's confessional and missional life is thus thrown into focus. Writing from a Reformed perspective, Will Storrar has argued that congregations of God's people must be 'identifiable as creatures of the Word of God, affirming the primacy of God's agency in the midst of their own innovative human agency' and which 'are free and able to develop appropriate and varied forms of the church's life' (Storrar 2017, p. 262). Like the individual lives that inhabit them, a congregation has its own theological situatedness created by its local, denominational, and confessional history. For Storrar, the congregation is a representative of the universal church of Jesus Christ, located in its specific geographical context. The Uniting Church in Australia's founding document, the *Basis of Union*, defines a congregation along similar lines as the 'embodiment in one place of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church' (Uniting Church Basis of Union 2018, p. 27). The phrase 'in one place' is important here as it affirms contextuality as critical to an embedded congregational witness responding to the enduring creative Word in its locale, and upholding apostolic succession in its own unique way.

Digging down deeper, according to Dylan Parker, a congregation also must be seen as more than a discrete ecclesial community with rigid demarcating lines. Rather, a congregation should be regarded as 'a public convergence of the various spheres, aspects, structures, cultures, realms, and institutions of public life as these are present in and through the congregants' (Parker 2022, p. 455). Parker's point is that imagining singular and simple identities (whether for individuals or the congregation at large) is artificial and reductionist. Church-goers are also employees or managers, members of families or community organizations, actors who are enmeshed in a range of public meaning-making contexts from workplaces to nations. Such dimensions bear upon their confessional identity and so the character of a congregation itself. Parker has argued that the congregation exists as a 'public space', a 'place of difference', meaning that it cannot be isolated from 'the multitude of [other] social realms' alongside which it persists (Parker 2022, p. 456). While the church has regularly retreated to postures of what Parker calls 'narrow authoritarianism' or 'romantic privatism', publicly facing and expectant congregations place themselves in the liminal 'in-between' space of inter-cultural conversations where a range of identities are at play. Of course, its commonality of faith and practice fashions the congregation into an identifiable community with certain shared markers, as Storrar and Peterson rightly insist, yet it remains a diverse assembly of people with diverse identities at the same time. According to Okesson, '[t]he problems [the church/congregation] face[s] in the world are social and thick, and thus the answers to those problems must also be social and thick'

(Okesson 2020, p. 118), requiring the congregation to pay heed to its multi-faceted identity and purpose.

Likewise, a congregation with missional intent retains porous boundaries where the flow of people ensures that, in practice, the discernable in/out categories, if they exist, are not tightly drawn. Participation by a diversity of people, with a range of levels of commitment, some who profess belief, some who do not, is evident in all its activities. The sociologist of religion Robert Wuthnow has used the term 'loose connections' (cited in Storrar 2017, pp. 272–73) to describe more general trends in church participation since the 1960s. Wuthnow has identified a trend away from thick, lifelong commitment towards more loosely defined association where someone might volunteer in a congregation's outreach ministries without participating in devotional gatherings like worship or Bible studies. Such a view belies a lot of ecclesiological thinking that (consciously or not) draws clear distinctions between 'church' and 'world' where the church is regarded as a 'homogenous, undifferentiated monolith' (Parker 2022, p. 453). Parker notes that communitarians like Stanley Hauerwas and public theologians like Dirk Smit, while maintaining very different approaches to how the church might think about its own identity-in-practice, yet share commonalities in definitional terms that (over) simplify the 'church/world' dichotomy. Parker problematizes such constructs, insisting that it minimizes and misconstrues the public character of people's lives whether they are 'church-goers' or not. In congregational settings, the milieu is characterized by intersections of various dimensions, meaning 'church' and 'world' can be somewhat unhelpful categories when considered as representing discrete constituencies. How does one think about a person who, for instance, brings their children to the congregationally run playgroup over years, never actually attends worship, but still describes it as 'her church' and feels a deep connection with the people and place? The church is always in the world, and the world is always in the church, requiring cross-cultivation and an open hermeneutic to apprehend where God is working.

5. 'Doing Good in the Community'

One of the repeated refrains I hear in conversation with those who do not see themselves as part of the confessional practice of the church is represented in the (positively intended) phrase 'you do so much good in the community'. Such a comment usually arises from a wider awareness of various community ministries like publicly available laundries or bathrooms, community lunches, pantries and the like. Socially engaged congregations look beyond the curation of their own internal piety to develop such ministries in response to Jesus' command to love one's neighbour as oneself, and so are constantly intertwined with people in their wider setting. Something like this comment is regularly conveyed, mostly without further qualification or interrogation in light of that public footprint. It is a kind of 'place-holder' statement used in casual engagement with an overtly religious people and their primary representative figure. It seems to provide a convenient and conventional short-hand for the most basic anecdotal, public–religious discourse, a way of talking coherently with people who inhabit a religious pattern of life on what is perceived to be both safe and common ground. Everyone can agree that 'doing good in the community' is a good idea whatever one's confessional stance.

The repetition of the sentiment 'doing good in the community' invites some deeper reflection. It appears to be a signifier for feelings that sit somewhere just beneath the surface. It requires some unpacking as it reflects a few dynamics operating at once which provide insights into the church's *habitus* (see Misztal 1996, pp. 102–56) in a secular world. Conscious of what Hugh Kerr has called 'the positioning question' (situatedness) (cited in Pearson 2017a, pp. 3–4), and how it bears upon analysis and understanding, I offer some particulars of my ministry setting. I am a 45-year-old, male, Anglo-Celtic Aus-

tralian minister of a middle-sized, middle-class, neighbourhood congregation of between 100 and 150 people. My denomination is the Uniting Church in Australia which sits in the Reformed/evangelical tradition and is a result of ecumenical trajectories in the 20th century that led to church union between Methodist, Congregational and Presbyterian elements in 1977. My wider community is regional, about 150 km from Sydney, Australia's largest, and most cosmopolitan city. My community is predominantly Anglo-Celtic, and in the 2021 Census registered on the older side compared to the national average (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2021). It is, however, becoming younger and more ethnically diverse, a profile reflected in the church membership, especially across the cliental engaged in the congregation's community ministries. It is within this particular environment that the phrase 'you do so much good in the community' finds its way into discourse.

Firstly, and positively, the phrase 'doing good in the community' is reflective of a congregation's public-facing [positive] demeanour, a pre-requisite for generating trust. Without public ministries which seek to develop what Tom Wright calls 'signposts' of God's Kingdom (Wright lists 'food banks', 'homeless shelters', 'volunteering to help those visiting relatives in prison', Wright 2020, pp. 64–65), the church minimizes its connection points within its neighbourhood and risks becoming anonymous except to its committed adherents. Alternatively, when its life is visible and transparent, accenting its missional intent it makes room for human interchanges to occur, and creates the potential to establish and deepen relationships, what Parker calls 'open, accessible, and accountable dialogue' (Parker 2022, p. 456). Without an intentional, corporately owned public-facing aspect, it can withdraw into missional passivity, and thus public obscurity. Trust that develops across the nominal church/world precipice, that is, that exists beyond the 'tribal', intra-church group, is almost impossible to grow beyond the simplest of connections in this scenario. 'Doing good in the community' speaks to a congregation's presence in the community and so its openness to developing trust in practice. It is a reflection of its 'faith in action' and speaks to the power and purpose of its public life.

Secondly, the phrase reveals assumptions about the wider public's ideas around what actually makes a church community trustworthy. 'Doing good in the community' translates, so it seems, to non-adherents' perception of the church's credibility, particularly those with no explicit affiliation or ongoing religious practice. 'Doing good in the community' is what confers legitimacy and authenticity in the public square and the eye of the religiously non-aligned beholder. This is a perception the church does well to bear in mind. As a marker of trustworthiness, 'doing good in the community' might have at least two derivative dimensions: one being that it is considered the congruent concrete outworking of the church's rhetoric around love, service, and the like, and two, that it displays an attitude that is un-self-interested, a perception the church has struggled to cultivate in the wake of vast cover-ups of abuse scandals. The church shows it is literally *with and for and committed to* the people of its immediate environment and so looking beyond itself. This attitude of selflessness commends it to those with no or only residual faith commitment. It is an 'entry point' of relationship.

Such perceptions might form a point of particular reflection for congregations as presently there persists a wider culture where 'thin trust' (defined by historian Geoffrey Hosking as being based on 'slight knowledge, or infrequent or superficial contact', in other words, it is more impressionistic than presupposing deeper knowledge and understanding (Hosking 2014, p. 47)) is in shorter and shorter supply. Thin trust allows for societies to function cohesively and (for the most part) smoothly with the general assumption that institutions (like banks, police, hospitals) and government fulfil their purpose faithfully as instruments intended for the common good. Rowan Williams summarizes the present fragility of trust; he observes that 'we have become remarkably cynical in many of our

attitudes, that we approach people in public life with unusual levels of suspicion' . . . and that . . . 'we don't feel the great institutions of our society are working for us', a view shared by other trust theorists like Onora O'Neill (Williams 2007, pp. 3–4; O'Neill 2002, pp. 4–7). Ironically, for such an individualistic age, the corporate responsibility of public institutions remains a point of public scrutiny and concern. Hence, a church which occupies itself by 'doing good in the community' counters such cynicism, so it seems.

Thirdly, the statement bears perhaps a deeper disinclination towards overt religious language and public discomfort around engagement with that (transcendent) facet of the church's identity. Via Gary Bouma and Ian Breward, Clive Pearson has mapped the particularity of Australia's 'skeptical democratic society' (Pearson 2017b, p. 277) in which, despite growing religious diversity, there is an underlying 'steady advance of the secular' (Pearson 2017b, p. 278). Pearson argues that amid a demanding and complex secular context, the 'transcendent nature of Christian claims is far from easy to advocate' (Pearson 2017b, p. 281). Advocate might yet be too strong a word; it is often far from easy even to initiate amid conversation, such is the apparent Australian aversion to questions of ultimate reality. The phrase 'doing good in the community' allows an interlocutor informed by this secular mindset to both engage and affirm a community of faith without having to probe further than surface-level anecdotal experience. The immanent and immediate sphere provides a 'comfort zone', and the church's participation in serving its community in practical ways is an easy and available conduit into non-problematic discourse. Thus, the conversation is kept on that pragmatic, practical basis. It can intentionally avoid more challenging questions about the nature of life and death, hope and truth, themes regnant in the church's long tradition of prayer, worship, and gathering. This presents a serious dilemma for the church around how it keeps its public speech true to its animating narrative without alienating or distancing the well-intentioned supporter. It also poses the dilemma of whether the thin trust represented in such an exchange can be developed into thicker bonds which may even include trust in God, the infinite other.

Following Barth, Andrew Root has explored such themes extensively in his *Churches and the Crisis of Decline: A Hopeful, Practical Ecclesiology for a Secular Age*. Root believes that churches and pastors mis-read the current church crisis as one pertaining to relevance (Root 2022, pp. 98–107). The argument follows that the 'problem' of numerical decline in the church has resulted from the modern world's dissatisfaction with much of the church's apparently archaic practices. The church has failed to stay 'relevant' in a technologically advanced and advancing era. Thus, more contextually acceptable cultural forms and modern media should be deployed in order for the church to connect successfully with generations for whom hymn singing, pews, organs, and even times of extended silence are considered *passe*. For Root, such a (mis)-reading lends itself to a reductionist sense of both God and the church and actually misses the point of the 'real dialectic' which relates to God's speaking and action in an immanent sphere that has closed its ears to a transcendent voice and power, at least as the church has historically described it. The rhetoric of 'doing good in the community' can provide a shield by which a transcendently dis-inclined populace protects itself from engagement with those deeper, eternal questions that pertain to the Gospel story.

A further dynamic is at play here reflective of the older modernist assumption of a public/private divide wherein faith is considered (relegated) as a private matter (a matter 'of the heart') and so vacuumed out of the public square and deemed not appropriate in the wider discourses of the world. A church may maintain publicly facing, visible buildings, but the assumption is its practices and the faith of its people will be kept securely inside, to be engaged at its adherents' discretion for personal fulfilment, but not beyond that. Pearson observes this view in the attitude of Australian sports journalist Peter Fitzsimons who

exclaimed that while personal religious conviction was fine, it should not be 'ballyhooed around in public' (Pearson 2017b, p. 282). 'Doing good in the community' is an acceptable form of public engagement because it can eschew all matters of transcendent claims completely in favour of what can be reduced to merely transactional exchanges of goods. Food and clothing can be offered to people in need without so much as a conversation, let alone a conversation about faith and the deeper intensities of life. Of course, faithful church communities look to each person in their entirety—body, mind, spirit—and so in some way seek to engage their whole relational existence rather than offering merely mechanistic, solution-based problems for their immediate physical needs. Yet, in the eye of the non-religious beholder, such ministries do not presuppose those deeper conversations and relational concerns, and so, once more, appear more generally palatable. They can be vehicles of public trust in the church precisely because the church, at least via the projected expectations of the secular 'other', does not invade the 'out-of-bounds' public space beyond its 'doing good'. Hence, while it can 'feel good' to be affirmed for 'doing good', there is potentially a false assumption about the public character of Christian action embedded that requires addressing. From a congregation's perspective, doing good in the community must bear the Gospel beyond the mere transactional or it can actually create a convenient buffer that allows people to keep a studied distance, avoiding the church's truth claims.

This begs a further question about the statement pertaining to the nature of the (public) 'good'. Geoff Thompson has pointed out that the liberal notion of the 'common good' is potentially problematic as '[t]he neutrality and openness that was the foundation of liberal ideas of the common good have increasingly been exposed as obscuring hidden prejudices and unacknowledged strategies of exclusiveness' (Thompson 2017, p. 162). 'Common good' is a complex term that might bear dynamics not immediately obvious. Yet certain strains of public theology have made much of the church's contribution to the 'common good' a desirable aspect of its vocation, that is, seeing itself as a beneficial actor which supports the flourishing of all peoples and communities beyond its parochial religious concerns, one prominent example being the work of Miroslav Volf (Volf 2015, *Flourishing*). It remains an enduring aspect of congregational purpose in the Protestant trajectory. This perhaps reflects the fact that, deriving from liberal notions which themselves emerged in contexts heavily conditioned by Christian ideas, the 'common good' itself is a residually Christian construct. Pearson notes the Reformed tradition's themes of 'common grace' and 'civic responsibility' as theological antecedents here (Pearson 2017a, p. 29). But, again, the reflections of public theologians have tended to be more theoretically based than with a congregational setting in mind, presupposing higher-level discourse than 'ordinary' community life.

Communions strong in social justice concerns have also regularly expressed this commitment in public statements, higher-level advocacy, and varieties of social organizing, which may or may not involve congregational life. In the context of the Uniting Church in Australia, justice concerns have been taken up at the institutional level through agencies like UnitingCare (now Uniting in NSW/ACT), which today is one of the largest social service organizations in the country. Uniting offers a vast portfolio of support programmes from elderly care to drug rehabilitation to youth educational services, contributing to the 'common good' with extensive influence and derived from faith-based roots in the church. An obvious and yet controversial example of Uniting's 'faith in action' came with the establishment of the Medically Supervised Injecting Centre (MSIC) in Sydney in 2001 (Herbert 2017, pp. 77–79). The first of its kind in the country, the MSIC's radical approach to harm minimization drew significant criticism and public concern in its establishment phase (Herbert 2017, pp. 78–81). Yet it represented a significant advance in the treatment of drug addition in Australia and emerged from out of a Christian denomination. As an exercise in public theology, the MSIC's faith-based foundations, while clear through

its association with the church, are only obliquely referenced under the rubric of 'social justice' and 'social welfare' by the MSIC's key founder, Rev. Harry Herbert, in his history of Uniting (Herbert 2017, p. 77).

In one sense, as a representation of a public theology in practice, Uniting and its ilk present outstanding examples of faith in action. Yet its links with the church (that is, the congregations of disciples place to place) and the practice of the church's confessional kerygma have become less and less concerted in the light of increasing professionalization, government funding regimes, and the ever-encroaching needs of greater compliance. Fewer and fewer connections with local faith communities are either desired or sought, and frequently where they have existed historically Uniting has chosen to cut ties. A simple example was when Uniting ended its long-standing partnership with my congregation's Men's Shed, meaning that governance and funding fell back completely on the local church. Such intra-church machinations are generally veiled to the surrounding community whose concern resides not with ecclesial politics but with the survival of a valued local service considered to be potentially under threat. The congregation was able to continue the Men's Shed long enough for it to incorporate and become responsible for its own welfare.

Thus, in my everyday conversation with the 'person on the street', it is the local, publicly acting community of faith that provides the most visible and tractable cohort for the development of public trust through the deployment of a public theology—faith in action. Our congregation operates a food pantry, a free laundry and bathroom service, a community lunch, and a playgroup, provides space for Alcoholics Anonymous groups, and networks with local businesses, schools, other churches, support organizations, and the like to consolidate the work. The character of a congregation's public engagement along such lines promotes inter-conciliar and collaborative relationships with a range of community actors. All such ministries are visible locally and, as more and more people become engaged through using one of the services or becoming involved, trust is grown. Newbigin's sense of the congregation as the primary construct for the church's public engagement is again borne out.

Still, though, questions arise. What is in mind in the statement 'doing good in the community'? Does it simply mean personal good deeds, good individual actions, and that is what is considered commendable? Or does it assume a purpose that pertains to the wellbeing of the wider community *as a community* in some way? Is there a sense that this 'doing good' strengthens the fabric of the surrounding society, setting it on more sustainable and equitable grounds? And is it offered in recognition that it is the practice of a certain kind of religious community that takes a place in the public square that such good is being offered? 'Doing good' in the community bears certain Pelagian overtones from a theological perspective, but perhaps it does also assume a wider notion of the wellbeing of all society, even if only in vague terms. Perhaps there is significance in the non-religious other's understanding of a church's purpose in this regard, even as the church by no means has a monopoly on 'doing good in the community'.

Unlike evangelism, which bears a specific intent to convert people to faith, in service to the common good the church seeks middle axioms and bridgeheads where it can find alignment points, synergies, and shared ground amid worldly contacts simply to build trust and relationships and contribute to the wellbeing of society. A large part of the good of 'doing good in the community' derives from the residual Christian ideas that still saturate the minds and general relational assumptions of a community like mine, as Tom Holland has argued is the case in the West more generally (Holland 2019, pp. 523–42). Correlated to this, Thompson observes that far from being based in liberalism's generic notions of non-distinctive commonality, or a somewhat glib perception of transactional goodness, for Christians, the 'strongest warrants for contributing to the common good derive from its

most distinctive beliefs' (Thompson 2017, p. 163), meaning that a congregation already maintains the confessional resources to be making such connections. The level of devotional practice maintained by members of the wider public may yet belie internal faith commitments they hold, and so present an open door to a congregation for building on such pre-existing resonances. Once more, the congregation as the hermeneutic of the Gospel presents this distinctive public conduit in its embodied practice.

6. Conclusions

Interrogating the phrase and signifying aspects of 'doing good in the community' reveals a mixed bag as it pertains to public trust. Negatively, it can function as an avoidance technique and a means of dialogue with a religious community that eschews the more threatening realm of transcendent beliefs. It can also be seen as indicative of a public context—in this case, a region of Australia—that has lost the ability to converse seriously around confessional commitments and ideas. A congregation seeking to generate public trust but maintain its distinctive faith identity takes such issues seriously and reflects on them for the sake of its ongoing practice. However, on balance, the positive side of the statement resides in the positive impression garnered of a people of Christ who see their lives as given for the sake of others—not only for themselves. However, a congregation might want to deepen engagement with the people of its community beyond 'doing good'; this positive public impression creates an open door that otherwise would be closed. As such, there are lessons for a congregation to learn in its pursuit of public trust that revolve around humility, concertedness, openness, and intentionality. It also underlines the significance of the ecclesiological emphasis on practice as constitutive of such trust. In my context at least, it is the congregation's deeds, before its preaching, that gains the attention of the world around. While, again, this presents a further challenge, still it enables connection into, at bare minimum, the space of conversation with a religiously ordered community in which further, thicker trust might be developed. Amid the threefold schema that sees believing, belonging, and behaving as critical elements of participation in a confessional community, belonging is that which most underscores relationality, just as trust does. In this sense, 'doing good in the community' can be a congregation's way into encouraging a sense of belonging and trust, before the question of devotional practice is raised.

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