

SUMMER 2021 | VOLUME 47 | NUMBER 3

# concordia journal



*On the cover: Detail images from the new stained-glass window in the north transept of the Chapel of St. Timothy and St. Titus at Concordia Seminary. The window as a whole depicts the return of Christ on the Last Day.*

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*Concordia Journal* is abstracted in *Internationale Zeitschriftenschau für Bibelwissenschaft und Grenzgebiete*, *New Testament Abstracts*, *Old Testament Abstracts*, and *Religious and Theological Abstracts*. It is indexed in ATLA Religion Database/ATLAS and Christian Periodicals Index. Article and issue photocopies in 16mm microfilm, 35mm microfilm, and 105mm microfiche are available from National Archive Publishing ([www.napubco.com](http://www.napubco.com)).

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The *Concordia Journal* (ISSN 0145-7233) is published quarterly (Winter, Spring, Summer, and Fall). The annual subscription rate is \$25 (individuals) and \$75 (institutions) payable to Concordia Seminary, 801 Seminary Place, St. Louis, MO 63105. New subscriptions and renewals also available at <http://store.csl.edu>. Periodicals postage paid at St. Louis, MO and additional mailing offices. Postmaster: Send address changes to *Concordia Journal*, Concordia Seminary, 801 Seminary Place, St. Louis, MO 63105-3196.

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A Concordia Seminary St. Louis Publication





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# Making Ethnography More Familiar, Theology More Strange

## Ethnographic Theology as Theological Practice

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*“. . . that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best.”  
(Philippians 1:9–11)<sup>1</sup>*

In summer 2019, I had the opportunity to lead a “Cultural Anthropology in Christian Perspective” seminar with graduate students at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis. Our goal was to explore the understandings and tools of cultural

anthropology and their usefulness in ministerial and congregational contexts. Students not only immersed themselves in anthropological literature, but also got their hands dirty with ethnographic fieldwork. The students explored various topics via participant observation—from conference presentations on “creation science” to the “killing fields of Cambodia,” from the quotidian camaraderie of a local barbershop to the blurred lines of “online baptism.”<sup>2</sup> Whether it was critically evaluating anthropological theories or discerning the methodological assumptions inherent in both ethnography and theology, our goal was the same: to make the strange more familiar and the familiar more strange. This, I told the cohort, was the goal of ethnographic research. As pastors and theologians tasked with carefully and critically considering how an ethnographic lens might help us fulfill our vocations, we came to appreciate that as the work of ethnography became more familiar, it was the work of theology that became more strange.

In this essay, my aim is to extend the discussions in that seminar and to reflect on how applying the perspectives, postures, and practices of ethnography might help academic theologians and pastors better understand the world we live in and better discern the varieties of theology and culture within our congregations, communities, and denominations. Based on my reading of the literature on “ethnographic theology” and my work as a pastor, theologian, and ethnographer of religion, I propose ethnography as *theological practice* helps pastors and theologians more holistically understand the diverse, overlapping, and sometimes contradicting religious experiences and perspectives of our congregations, communities, and church bodies. Moving beyond a focus on texts and traditions, as well as timeworn modes of thinking about the relation between theology and culture, ethnographic theology brings a fresh perspective to our theological discourse by summoning together the everyday and the academic, to create new conversations around worship and living. In the end, I suggest that to effectively discern how to navigate the “diversity and difference”<sup>3</sup> of the world and the contexts we live and work in, we need to become better ethnographers.

### ***Ethnography + Theology = Ethnographic Theology?***

Before addressing how ethnographic theology might be helpful, I want to set out some basic understandings of how I employ its constituent terms. First, at its most basic, *ethnography* is the “description of a people and its way of life”<sup>4</sup> and involves both intensive research among a people group or community and making an account of those people’s way of life.<sup>5</sup> Over the course of the twentieth century, ethnography became one of the primary means of *doing* cultural anthropology—the comparative study of “humankind’s cultural expressions, institutions, and commitments.”<sup>6</sup> Distinguishing itself from more quantitative approaches (surveys, structured interviews, focus groups, etc.), ethnographers offer a more nuanced, qualitative account of a culture or community *from the perspective of* that culture or community (as much as this is possible, given the ethnographer’s background, identity, experience, and so forth).

Therefore, ethnographers spend an intense amount of time living among, observing, participating alongside, and interviewing people in their “natural” settings, where “the behavior of people in everyday situations is followed as it happens.”<sup>7</sup> This is often known as “ethnographic fieldwork” or simply “fieldwork.” Those natural settings—the field—can be anything from social media to street art collectives, a local environmental council to a globally networked megachurch, and many settings in between and beyond. To put it quite simply, ethnography is “hanging out and doing stuff”<sup>8</sup> with people over a long period of time with the goal of better appreciating the entirety of their lives—work, relationships, habits, religious practice, and so on. As anthropologist Matthew Engelke put it,

doing fieldwork is akin to being “that kid in school who always wanted to play with everyone. ‘Hey, what’s going on?! Can I join in?’”<sup>9</sup> As might be assumed, such research comes with its own set of practical and ethical considerations, which will be discussed later.

Second, *theology* is, broadly and etymologically speaking, “talk about God” or “god talk.”<sup>10</sup> As both theologian and ethnographer, I view theology in two ways. On the one hand, theology is the “rigorous inquiry and mastery of a body of knowledge related to the formal teachings of a religious tradition and scholastic reflection upon that tradition’s core doctrines.”<sup>11</sup> This is what we might call “academic theology.” This tradition has generally been shaped by a privileged group of academically trained theologians and has not involved lay persons or marginalized communities to a robust degree. On the other hand, theology also encompasses the various ways in which people talk about “god,” situated as they are in particular places, communities, languages, bodies, and historical moments. From this perspective, “theology” encompasses any kind of talking about “god” in everyday life, is not limited to any one tradition or privileged community and may or may not be concerned with “orthodoxy” in the strict sense of the term. This is what we might call “everyday theology.” In making this distinction, I do not mean to imply that there is no crossover between the two. Often, there is. Academic theology is not divorced from everyday life and is also embedded in particular communities, contexts, and institutions. Likewise, everyday theology is not made up of uneducated conversations about “the divine” or “spirituality,” but is often informed by academic discourses, textual interpretation, and the like.

In either case, I begin with the premise that theology, whether academic or everyday, is a cultural practice, spoken from particular people and influenced by particular times and places.<sup>12</sup> The question is whether we are properly equipped to discern how theologies are culturally situated. Although I suspect that “academic theology” is the kind most Lutheran pastors are more familiar with—given our penchant for academic training and accomplishment—we frequently encounter everyday theology in ministry and daily life. The issue is that regardless of encounter and experience, pastors and theologians are often not properly prepared to situate either kind of theology in a cultural sense or deal with it any other way than to subject it to the categories offered by our academic theological training.

*Ethnographic theology* is meant to help us do this situating. Moreover, it helps us better attend to the gaps between academic and everyday theology, given their varying cultural “situatedness.” Or, in other words, it can help us steward the interaction between the academic and the everyday and discern how to navigate the frictions and gaps between them in our congregations, communities, and synod. Over the years, ethnography and theology have mutually informed one another in various ways, engaging in dialogue—for better or for worse—from

*The question is whether we are properly equipped to discern how theologies are culturally situated.*

their respective disciplinary perspectives.<sup>13</sup> In this essay, however, I follow Natalie Wigg-Stevenson (among others) in calling for ethnography to be employed as a *theological discipline*. Moving beyond a dialogue between ethnography and theology,

Wigg-Stevenson frames ethnographic theology as a discipline that offers the chance to shift our conversations from “theological traditions enshrined in texts toward theological traditions embodied in practice.”<sup>14</sup> As Matthew Geiger put it, if ethnography is “writing about people and their culture with and among those people and culture” then ethnography in a “theological mode is about learning the truth about people and their experience in order that truth may emerge” through the very process of ethnographic learning and writing.<sup>15</sup> Along the way, ethnographic theology as a spiritual discipline invites us to explore difficult questions about the relationships between academic and everyday theology, between theological knowledge produced in the classroom and that produced in everyday contexts.

Geiger offers a helpful illustration of this. He asks us to visualize writing responses to a set of questions about our theology and praxis and then posing the same questions to a particular constituency (people experiencing homelessness, youth at your church, people at the coffee shop across the street). Imagine, Geiger wrote, “this person writing their honest and intelligent answers that are based on his or her experience, and placing them on the table next to your responses.”<sup>16</sup> Reading and comparing those answers, you might hope to find a certain alignment, but as Geiger wrote, we are also highly likely to “discover a gap” or a certain amount of “slippage” between our answers and that of those we compare them to. Indeed, “contrary to what academic theologians [and academically trained theologians] think, our work does not easily connect to so-called ordinary believers, nor does it necessarily recognize their wisdom.”<sup>17</sup> Ethnographic theology invites us into a much more intimate manner of comparing these experiences and practices and exploring the gaps between them so that we might discover “fresh theological insights and new possibilities for Christian living.”<sup>18</sup> This perspective and posture helps shift our focus away from immediately interpreting (and perhaps too quickly condemning) our peoples’ beliefs and instead analyzing them as discourses and practices shaped at, by, and through the convergence of multiple streams of influence and experience.<sup>19</sup>

As pointed out by Geiger, this practice not only helps us understand our congregations and communities, but also our own theology and praxis. This is important because academic training in our tradition tends to emphasize preparing pastors for believing, teaching, and defending our theology, less so for understanding

its cultural situatedness. Furthermore, the socialization of our synod tends to surround us with others who call on the same texts and traditions that we do and engage in a discourse with shared language and assumptions. Although we equip pastors and religious educators with a certain degree of cultural awareness, there is not sufficient training for our church workers to fully comprehend how our theology is culturally situated or to understand the theology of others as anything more than “strange” and in need of correction. Essentially, we do not train them to recognize and address “the power of culture to shape [theological] assumptions”<sup>20</sup> and how that has given a very particular shape to our synod and its interactions with the wider world. In other words, “theologians do not interpret scripture, appropriate tradition, or exercise reason in a vacuum,” but through “embodied interactions with the world, other persons, and the holy.”<sup>21</sup> Similar to how ethnography proper helps cut through the clutter of ethnocentrism to see others as fully human beings, ethnographic theology also helps cut through the clutter of *theocentrism*—the tendency to view our own theology as best and to judge the behavior and beliefs of theologically different people by our own standards.<sup>22</sup> By carefully tending to the nuances of how religious expressions and faith responses are situated within a context—specific social, historical, and cultural spaces and times—ethnographic theology opens up the possibility of understanding our own theology as “strange,” while simultaneously better comprehending the theological “other” and the conditions out of which their seemingly “strange” theologies arise.

### **“Strange” Theologies**

Ethnographic theology is all the more urgent given the degree of diversity and difference we experience in the contemporary world. Given the rapid rise of global cities and the networks that link them, layers upon layers of peoples, cultures, histories, philosophies, religions, and bodies bump up against one another, come into conflict, or fuse together into new coalitions and combinations.<sup>23</sup> As a result, our ideas of identity—of what a place or a people should or could be—are constantly called into question. The experience of this globalized diversity is not limited to cosmopolitan urban centers or jet-setting international travelers. Instead, the “other”—the person, place, idea, or thing that is seen as different, and often framed as undesirable or deplorable—is constantly there . . . or, rather, *here*. The “other” is on our television screen, our social media feeds, in our e-mail inboxes. They are sitting next to us on the airplane, drinking coffee at the table across from us, working in our fields, serving us our meals, moving in next door, becoming our bosses, or sitting in our pews. This experience of “globality” embedded in the mundane experiences of everyday life is what Ulrich Beck called, “banal cosmopolitanism.”<sup>24</sup> This means that even if you wanted to, you cannot escape

the “other.” Diversity and difference are a fact of everyday life. The challenge is how to think and relate to those people, places, and things that are different to us or outside our current conception of where our “cosmos”—our perceptual, cognitive, and affective universe—ends. James Davison Hunter wrote that this challenge of “difference is straightforward: how do we think about and relate to those who are different from us and to a world that is not our world?”<sup>25</sup>

As both an ordained pastor with parish experience in the United States and abroad, and as an ethnographer of religion, I have seen the ubiquity of this diversity in multiple contexts. As a church worker and pastor, I witnessed the ways in which this diversity expresses itself in Lutheran congregations, the communities they are located in, and in denominational institutions—from Houston, Texas to Berlin, Germany, from Palmerston North, New Zealand to Phoenix, Arizona. I’ve had members share theological perspectives and spiritual practices that fall well outside the bounds of “confessional Lutheran theology” and encountered a virtual smorgasbord of religious beliefs and practices in the communities I’ve been called to serve. Several pastoral colleagues also have shared with me the “strange” theologies they have encountered. They regaled me with stories on everything from worship liturgies to essential oils, spiritual disciplines to conspiracy theories, communion practices to congregational leadership and many things beyond, betwixt, and in between. Some of these theologies, while strange, are benign; others are shocking, others schismatic, others heartbreakingly sad. A common thread in the conundrums these pastors shared was how they struggled to understand *where* these “strange” beliefs and practices came from or, in other words, how they were culturally situated.

These are a few examples I’ve experienced or heard from fellow pastors:

- A lifelong Lutheran who was perfectly comfortable with confessing their faith in the words of the Ecumenical Creeds on Sunday but insisted on turning to horoscopes and astrology as mediums for discerning God’s will in the world Monday through Saturday.
- A member reacting to this diversity who was convinced that the Freedom of Religion clause in the US Constitution was crafted only for Christians.
- A Muslim man that showed up at a church during a community festival and asked to pray in the corner of the sanctuary.
- A leader of a congregation, a longtime member and pillar of the community, who confessed on his deathbed that he’d been an atheist his entire life but had stayed involved in a Lutheran church because his wife wanted him there. He said he’d loved her enough to *fake* it for over forty years.
- Converts who continue to perform the rites of Santería they were raised with.

- Members requesting interreligious weddings to Hindus, atheists, or Scientologists.
- Others that insist that only certain pages of *The Lutheran Hymnal* (1941) are appropriate for worship or that for communion wine to be efficacious it has to be kosher.
- A member who believed that the “lost sheep of Israel” (Mt 15:24) only referred to “white people.” “In his eyes,” a colleague said, “no other race was saved.”

As these stories imply, the challenge of “difference” confronts us in multiple ways. In fact, it is my inclination that we are already aware of the wide degree of “tension and slippage”<sup>26</sup> when it comes to our academic theologies and the lived practice of our congregants’ and community members’ lives. Seeing as theological norms can be, and often are, frustratingly “distant from the variable actual self-understanding of worshipers,” our ministry in our congregations and communities suffers as a result.<sup>27</sup> In addition to our faithful teaching and sound pastoral care, our congregations and communities—a complex tangle of experiences, beliefs, and perspectives—require careful attention to discover and address. It has become clear, perhaps painfully so, that “it is not sufficient to assume we know in advance what Christian experience is.”<sup>28</sup> Moreover, we cannot even assume to know, or have figured out because of our academic training, what religious experience is beyond the bounds of Christianity. Instead we should attend to local variations and encounter individual proclivities on their own terms. Rather than treating these postures and practices as purely theological conundrums to be addressed through a combination of corrective teaching and pastoral discipline, we must also attend to issues of culture that are at play in the make-up of our congregants’ theologies. Before we can hope to approach them theologically, we need to unearth them ethnographically.

### ***Lutherans and the Question of “Culture”***

Traditionally speaking, Lutherans have used much ink on the topics of theology and culture and the value of anthropological approaches to the theological task. Although students of culture and students of theology can be strange bedfellows, Lutherans of our ilk seem to be fairly comfortable with conversations between theology and a broad range of cultural issues, from the relevance of culture to our worship practices;<sup>29</sup> what it means to do theology and ministry in a “secular” or “(post)modern” culture;<sup>30</sup> Christianity and culture in American, Latina/o, or Japanese perspective;<sup>31</sup> theology in an age of social media;<sup>32</sup> the challenges and opportunities of modern science;<sup>33</sup> of politics and persecution in North America;<sup>34</sup> or the practical theology of leading multiethnic churches.<sup>35</sup> In particular, Lutheran

missiologists and missionaries have long valued the relevance of an anthropological perspective in applying Scripture in cultural context. I would venture to say that many of us have an axiomatic appreciation that to do theology well, we must attend to culture and its multiple manifestations in text and tradition.

Alongside biblical exegesis, we have also frequently engaged in “cultural exegesis.” Similar to how we seek to avoid the dangers of reading too much into the text of Scripture through a careful reading “out of” the biblical texts we are seeking to apply, so too we endeavor to “open our minds” (Lk 25:45) to understand the culture in which we worship, show mercy, and witness. This requires a certain amount of “exegeting” the community in which we do such work. Preachers seek to see how God is at work in their city, how Jesus is viewed in their town, see how the word speaks to people at work, in life, and at play, and figure out who their neighbors really are. The hope is that if we successfully interpret the context of our community’s culture, the word we so carefully expound will resonate not only with a select few, but with a great number in our congregations and communities. This looks different for each theologian, but the idea is that discerning the connections between theology and culture enables pastors and theologians to do better ministry.

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You might be thinking, traditionally speaking, this works. However, given the rapid speeding up and spreading out of encounters with diversity and difference over the last several decades, our thinking about, and practice of, anthropological perspectives and practices has not kept pace. Up to the middle of the twentieth century, theologians by and large appreciated

and accommodated the insights of anthropology and their relevance to theological studies. However, the disrupting effects of globalization, migration, post-colonialism, and urbanization have changed the world and anthropologists have changed the way they look at it accordingly. Theologians have been a bit slower to keep up and our ability to discern the world in all its messy complexity has suffered as a result.<sup>36</sup> As Michael Rynkiewich wrote, “anthropology has changed and it would be worthwhile . . . to discover anew how fresh insights can contribute to their understanding of local cultures, local Christianities, and the missionary situation.”<sup>37</sup> Ethnographic theology is one way that pastors and other theological practitioners might discern—or “properly distinguish”—between “theology” and “culture” in all their dizzying contemporary forms.<sup>38</sup> Going one step further, ethnographic

theology invites us *to do* the work of theology, rooted as it is in the daily realities of life.

The goal is not to come to a place of non-judgement, but to be non-reactive in the process of research as we seek to discern from whence seemingly “strange” theologies emerge. Being more prescient of our presuppositions, and stewarding our authoritative presence well, in such situations helps us engage and maintain awareness so that we might have a different conversation than we are used to having. This is not an invitation to radical relativism, but to bracketing knee-jerk reactions that can prevent us from appreciating the lived realities of everyday theology. Ethnographic theology invites us to look more closely at the lives of Christians, and others, in everyday contexts to see how their theologies function and make meaning for them according to their own circumstances. By inviting us to suspend judgment so that we might first understand, ethnographic theology is about setting seemingly “strange” theologies into “wider social contexts” of which they are a part of a *prelude* to discernment.<sup>39</sup> Thus, utilizing ethnography as a means of *doing* theology, we are able to discern how we might best minister to those in our congregation and communities and “speak the truth in love” (Eph 4:15). The love, in this instance, is the discipline of ethnographic understanding, setting the “strange” theologies we encounter into the more holistic, and often messy, context of everyday life. If theologians desire to impact everyday Christian practice (social, ethical, political, religious, etc.)—and I would argue that we do—we should work at the edges between ethnography and theology to explore the dynamic, and productive, tension between the two.<sup>40</sup> Or, as Wigg-Stevenson writes, if “shaping Christian practice is an explicit goal of Christian theology . . . ethnography can help us do that shaping.”<sup>41</sup> As one of my students said, it was learning about, and employing, ethnographic practices that brought new insight for him as a pastor in the midst of the world’s hyperdiversity. He told me, “The key thing I learned [from this course] was a theoretical framework for practices that I do instinctively as a pastor. But building on that, the course also strengthened those practices by adding depth and systematization. The ‘doing ethnography’ assignments were crucial in this regard.”<sup>42</sup>

To that point, there are multiple issues on which ethnographic theology has already produced fresh insight. In her work, Wigg-Stevenson employed the postures and practices of ethnography to investigate—and problematize—her own teaching in a Baptist church. Her research not only offered insight into the intersection of academic theology and everyday faith, but also into the ways in which ethnographic theology could be considered a Christian practice in the context of a local church. While not explicitly a work of ethnographic theology, Brian M. Howell’s ethnographic exploration of “short-term missions” (STM)

as a form of Christian travel not only helped unearth some of the guiding metanarratives that shape the experience of those participants, but also afforded an opportunity to critique those narratives and associated practices and offer guidance on how STM might be restructured and reshaped so that they help Christians travel, encounter cultural diversity, and seek the “good of others when they do.”<sup>43</sup> And, in brief, Joel Robbins, a trained anthropologist without theological training, helped point out how a more robust dialogue between anthropologists and theologians can, and should, produce more nuanced understanding of trends such as the “Prosperity Gospel” and its rapid expansion and acceptance in multiple contexts across the globe.<sup>44</sup> In my own preliminary research, ethnography has helped me unearth insights about the cultural underpinnings of xenophobia and religiously inflected racism within evangelical congregations and communities and helped me address them theologically and pastorally. Beyond these brief examples, there are numerous other issues and topics that have been addressed in this field, from forms of worship<sup>45</sup> to pastoral care in the context of assisted dying,<sup>46</sup> to the practice of urban and missional ministry,<sup>47</sup> and to the multiple modes of digital ecclesiology.<sup>48</sup>

### ***Practical Considerations***

If we are open to the provocations above, the question becomes *how* we might *do* ethnographic theology. Doing ethnographic theology is in many ways distinct from other modes of doing theology. First, ethnography—as a form of surrendering to a situation as a participant observer and becoming apprenticed as the “village idiot” by those we engage with—is a more vulnerable position than the more authoritative role typically adopted by academic and pastoral theologians used to studying, counseling, teaching, and preaching from a place of authority.<sup>49</sup> Additionally, ethnographic theology is also distinct from ethnographic research proper. In ethnographic theology, we must avoid reducing ethnography to its methods or theology to being data. Instead, ethnographic theology seeks a more permeable, and fruitful, exchange between the two. The vulnerability, and the openness to wonder<sup>50</sup> in the process of ethnographic exploration, is worth the fruit.

Second, ethnographic theology means bringing a certain “hermeneutics of suspicion”<sup>51</sup> to our congregants, community members, and ourselves. This is distinct from “normal” work in either theology or ethnography. On the one hand, by bringing “reflexive attention” in order to “theorize carefully the relationship between ourselves and our fields of study”<sup>52</sup> as pastors and theologians, ethnographic theology breaks down some of the seemingly objective barriers between pastor and congregant, clergy and community member, academic theologian and everyday theologian.<sup>53</sup> On the other hand, by admitting that pastors and

theologians do not stand outside “the borders of everyday theology’s territories”<sup>54</sup> and that we are enmeshed in the communities that we are studying, ethnographic theology also confronts the perceived safety of “methodological agnosticism”<sup>55</sup> or even bracketing our “personal faith” as ethnographers in order to be more removed and thus “objective.”<sup>56</sup>

Instead, ethnographic theology means we embrace the generative frictions between being both critics and caretakers,<sup>57</sup> blending critique with compassion in order to work out a more honest and robust theology together with the people we live in community with. Such a theology could more winsomely speak to the real, “tangible, messy congregations you find down the street”<sup>58</sup> or just beyond our too often closed office doors. This process will be complex because religion, and theology, is what people believe, do, feel, and express in evolving contexts and life situations. Rarely are people’s theologies just one thing or one thing all the time or one thing throughout their lives. It is time we humbly come to admit, and engage with, that reality.

Third, ethnographic theology as a discipline gives us a mirror to look more deeply at ourselves. In other words, it prompts us to take that which is familiar (our own theology) and to make it more strange. This means seeing our theology as a product of a huge web of connections and conditions and how they have come together to produce a range of theological habits that may or may not match the reality of the world. Ethnographic theology not only invites us to “theorize carefully the relationship between ourselves and our fields of study”<sup>59</sup> but also to critique our own theologies and their application in the life of the church, the context of our community, and the broader ecology of our denomination.<sup>60</sup> Engaging in ethnography as theological practice prompts us to see our immersion in the worlds of our congregation or community not as a secular, or purely academic, task, but as a profound opportunity to discern where God is at work in the strangeness of the different contexts we live in and where he might be prompting us to change as well.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, there are ethical considerations to wrestle with when it comes to the performance and practice of ethnography. I do not mean to suggest that ethnographic theology is unencumbered by issues such as a person’s position in society, power differences between pastors and their membership, or accountability when conducting research with vulnerable people, especially minors, the emotionally exposed, or people within marginalized

*The vulnerability, and the openness to wonder in the process of ethnographic exploration, is worth the fruit.*

communities. The resources I cited wrestle with such issues and a perusal of their contents offers a wide range of tactics and tools to navigate the ethical conundrums produced in the confluence of ethnographic research and theological practice. Although this paper does not permit for a full exploration of the ethical issues associated with ethnography in general and ethnographic theology in particular, I have some short-term and long-term suggestions for how we might train pastors and theologians in this regard so that the benefits of ethnographic theological practices can be explored more fully.

In the end, there is no substitute for proper training in ethnography. Thus, in the short-term, I suggest that the training institutions, districts, and other institutions of our synod work to provide opportunities for pastors and church workers to be more intentionally introduced to the tools of ethnographic research through workshops, seminars, and other modes of ongoing education. An ethnographic field school, wherein participants spend an “intensive, extended stay in a locale significantly different from [their] usual surroundings” and which involves oversight and instruction in ethnographic methods might also be worth exploring.<sup>61</sup> Moreover, pastors and church workers in the parish can utilize a range of texts to better familiarize themselves with ethnography and its attendant ethical and methodological issues. Beyond works referenced in the endnotes, there are numerous introductions to the field that I use in my teaching, such as *Doing Cultural Anthropology* by Michael V. Angrosino, *Contemporary Field Research: Perspectives and Formulations* by Robert M. Emerson, and *How to Think Like an Anthropologist* by Matthew Engelke. Specifically relevant to understanding power dynamics and vulnerability in interviews is Lee Ann Fujii’s *Interviewing in Social Science Research: A Relational Approach*. Most relevant to this essay, Mary Clark Moschella’s *Ethnography as Pastoral Practice: An Introduction* specifically provides “a roadmap for students, pastors, and religious leaders who want to get started in ethnographic listening as a form of pastoral theology and practice.”<sup>62</sup> In the long-term, we might consider how to more fully integrate such training into the existing academic curricula of our seminaries, colleges, and other institutions of higher education.

There are always challenges, limitations, and unseen complexities when we aim to immerse, and continually adjust, ourselves to the reality of contemporary lives and worlds. Thus, ethnographic theology cannot hope to offer any sort of universal picture or theological perspective. Instead, its much humbler aim is to put theological traditions into closer, and more critical, conversation with everyday Christian practices.<sup>63</sup> In the end, our efforts at ethnographic theology will help create “as nuanced a picture as possible” of the lived realities of our congregations and communities so that we might make theology (and ethnography, for that matter) a more mobilizing force in the world. In particular, the hope is that it

will reveal some possibly novel ways forward in addressing a range of issues, including some of the particularly “sticky wickets” that confront our congregations and communities in the contemporary age.

### ***From Text to Tool***

At the beginning of this article, I mentioned a range of “strange” theologies and commented on how ethnographic theology might help these become more familiar. At the same time, this paper was very much about making ethnography more familiar so that our own theologies might become more strange, at least in a sense. I suggested we move beyond conventional applications of anthropology in missiological contexts or traditional conceptualizations of “theology and culture” to dig deeper to encounter the everyday theologies of our congregations and communities. Reflecting on how we might apply the perspectives, postures, and practices of ethnography, I proposed that ethnographic theology would help us better understand the world we live in and better discern the variances of theology and culture within our own congregations, communities, and traditions.

In lieu of a conclusion, I would instead like to give readers a few practical prompts so that they might explore putting the tools of ethnographic theology into practice within their present contexts. These “projects” mirror similar ones I give to students in my courses on ethnography at the colleges and seminaries at which I’ve taught and provide an opportunity for theologians, pastors, and church workers to “dip their toes” into the practice of ethnography as a means of theologizing. Staying cognizant of pertinent ethical considerations and the limitations of such practices, I suggest four “projects” that readers might try, and reflect upon, on their own:

**“Take your pastor to work day”** Similar to popular “take your child to work day” programs, this project involves shadowing one of your parishioners through a “normal day” at work. While we must remain attentive to the ways in which our presence will impact the “normalcy” of the day, this practice offers an opportunity for pastors or church workers to get to know a congregant in the context of their everyday—or *workaday*—life. “Workplace observation” has been used “in a wide variety of studies in ethnographic research” and provides “valuable firsthand knowledge”<sup>64</sup> of an individual’s jobs, responsibilities, skills, professional networks, quotidian environment, and, in this case, the context wherein their vocation as a Christian is lived out from “nine-to-five.” This might involve spending a day on the farm helping to wean calves or attending meetings with a high-level oil executive; it might mean hanging out in a classroom as your parishioner teaches a room full of students; or chit-chatting with clients at the local salon where your

parishioner does hair. In each case, the observer should follow the protocols and security measures of each context, obtaining permission from both your parishioner and the relevant authorities. In the end, spend some time reflecting on what you hoped to observe, what you observed, and why it might matter for your theological work and practice.

**“Becoming a perfect stranger”** As mentioned above and referenced elsewhere, religious diversity has been, and is evermore a part of, “the very fabric of the United States.”<sup>65</sup> This project invites you to visit a mosque, synagogue, temple, or other place of worship. In this instance, you might even consider taking a small group of people from your congregation along with you. Again, being considerate of the host communities’ conventions and expectations of guests, take some time to not only visit another religious communities’ place of prayer, devotion, or worship, but also talk to members of that community. Rather than preparing for a polemic debate or some form of formal interreligious dialogue, instead work toward informal conversations about religious convictions, practice, and material culture that you observe or are curious about. Attempt to suspend judgment and instead focus on listening and learning. Later, reflect on what you observed, what you heard, and what you felt along the way. Write out the who, what, why, where, and how of what you observed, while also trying to discern why this worldview and set of practices is meaningful for those you observed and spoke to.

**“Of Winkels and twitches”** Ethnographic practice is not only meant to help us understand “the other,” but also to reflect on our own institutions and practices. In this project, you are invited to be a “participant observer” at some form of congregational, district level, or other form of “church” meeting. For pastors in particular, I suggest that at your next “Winkel” you spend time watching and listening to the dynamics of the meeting in order that you might be able to provide a “thick description” of the event after it is over. Thick description involves narrating not only the physical behaviors of a human social event or actions, but the context of the event or actions as understood by the actors you observe, so that it can be better apprehended by an outsider. Famously, Clifford Geertz wrote that the goal of thick description is to discern the difference between a “wink” and a “twitch”—one has contextual meaning, the other is a biological reaction to external stimuli. By keeping notes throughout the meeting, making a map of the environment or a sketch of the participants, and the like, try writing a description of the meeting for an audience of readers who are not familiar with the setting at

all. What do you learn from this process? How does this seemingly “normal” function of church life suddenly become more strange to you in the process?

**“Preach it at Starbucks”** Numerous pastors and church workers I know like to prepare sermons, Bible studies, or lessons of some kind at a local café. In this project, take your prep to a café for the day. Spend part of that time hanging out and observing the place (in ways similar to examples 1 and 3 above) taking note of who is there, what they do, what rituals exist, and how people navigate the space and place. Then, spend some time reflecting on how your sermon, Bible study, or lesson might “preach” were it delivered to the person sitting next to you sipping their piping hot latte or the barista wiping foam from the espresso machine. If you feel it is appropriate, and not horribly disruptive, ask someone if you might share what you’re working on with them. Share a snippet of your sermon, study, or lesson and ask for their reflections on it. What did they hear? What do they think it means? Is it relevant to their life and context? What do they think about the topic, theme, or text you shared? Without entering a debate, and again focusing on listening and learning, take notes from the conversation. Later, as you finalize your sermon, study, or lesson, try to integrate some insights you gain from this interaction.

The projects above, at least in some way, mirror practices of immersive and attentive pastoral care and ministry. Practically speaking, however, this requires more than typical theological practices or methods of pastoral care. Rather than simply trying to “get to know” your congregants or community members, you are taking the extra step of intentionally observing their behavior in order to move past the surface and dig into the more mundane and everyday aspects of their lives through ethnographic attentiveness. Beyond these projects, it will mean *doing* theology alongside your congregation with longevity and repetition, regularly participating together in the vibrant heart of theology as it is lived in the more mundane contexts of life.

Over time, the extra effort makes pastors and academic theologians more aware of the world God loves and is actively at work in. At the same time, while we acknowledge that God is at work, this does not preclude “looking all the more closely at how people act in the world.”<sup>68</sup> God’s agency does not absolutely displace human agency. Thus, we must attend to the “joys and tensions, pleasures and frustrations” that mark the ways in which our congregations and communities wrestle with the stuff of life and the stuff of God simultaneously, in the midst of the muck and mess of an often mundane existence.<sup>69</sup> Augmenting, and in some ways challenging, our usual methods of obtaining doctrinal insight and theological

wisdom, ethnographic theology helps us attend to the concrete contexts of lived theology so that our understanding of the church is more grounded, sustainable, and accountable.<sup>70</sup> The goal is to understand people as they are, interrogate our positionality and impact in a community or culture, and anticipate God's presence and work among us all so that we might better discern what the gospel is saying to the people in our care, *at this time, in this place*; to keep our theology both holy and humble. Although this might be different than the theology, or pastoral care, that we are used to doing—you might even say that it is “strange”—the hope is that it makes the world around us more familiar and more fruitful for ministry in our time.

## Endnotes

- 1 I would like to thank Jack Schultz for his teaching and influence on my thinking about theology and anthropology over the years. He is a formidable source of insight on how to do the cultural discernment I seek to foster here. He often kept this verse at the forefront of his students' minds as we considered theology and culture's concomitant relationship.
- 2 A. Trevor Sutton, "Liminal Links: Church in a Digital Age," *The Cresset* 83, no. 1 (Michaelmas 2019): 19–26; "Theologizing Virtual Reality," *Sightings* (July 25, 2019).
- 3 See James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).
- 4 Michael V. Angrosino, *Doing Cultural Anthropology: Projects in Ethnographic Data Collection* (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 2006), 1.
- 5 Derived as the word is from ἔθνος meaning "folk" or "people" and γράφω "to write."
- 6 Matthew Engelke, *How to Think Like an Anthropologist* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), 3.
- 7 Angrosino, *Doing Cultural Anthropology*, 2.
- 8 Engelke, *How to Think*, 11.
- 9 Engelke, *How to Think*, 11.
- 10 Derived as it is from the Greek θεός and λόγος.
- 11 Diane M. Stewart Diakité, "The Limits of Theology: Notes from a Theographer," in "Ethnography and Theology: A Critical Roundtable Discussion," *Practical Matters* (March 1, 2010).
- 12 See H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975); Paul Tillich, *Theology of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959); and Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology* (Fortress Press, 1997).
- 13 See Joel Robbins, "World Christianity and the Reorganization of Disciplines: On the Emerging Dialogue between Anthropology and Theology," in *Faith in African Lived Christianity: Bridging Anthropological and Theological Perspectives*, ed. Karen Lauterbach and Mika Vähäkangas (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 15–37. See also Delwin Brown, Sheil Greeve Davaney, and Kathryn Tanner, eds., *Converging on Culture: Theologians in Dialogue with Cultural Analysis and Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).
- 14 Natalie Wigg-Stevenson, "What's Really Going On: Ethnographic Theology and the Production of Theological Knowledge," *Cultural Studies Critical Methodologies* 18, no. 6 (November 2017).
- 15 Matthew W. Geiger, "A Review of 'Ethnography as Christian Theology and Ethics,'" *Religious Education* 109, no. 1 (2014): 103–106.
- 16 Geiger, 103.
- 17 Mary McClintock Fulkerson on Natalie Wigg-Stevenson, *Ethnographic Theology: An Inquiry into the Production of Theological Knowledge* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), backmatter.
- 18 Natalie Wigg-Stevenson, "Reflexive Theology: A Preliminary Proposal," *Practical Matters* (Spring 2013): 5.
- 19 Wigg-Stevenson, "Reflexive Theology," 6.
- 20 Jack M. Schultz, "Properly dividing: distinguishing the variables of culture from the constants of theology or it's not how you look, it's how you think you look," *Missio Apostolica* 22, no. 1 (May 2014): 63–72.
- 21 Michelle Voss Roberts, *Tastes of the Divine: Hindu and Christian Theologies of Emotion* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), 3.
- 22 Derived from Kottak's discussion of "ethno-centrism" in *Cultural Anthropology*, 10th ed. (New York: McGraw Hill, 2003), 78.
- 23 See Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: The Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996) and Thomas A. Tweed, *Crossing and Dwelling: A Theory of Religion* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).
- 24 Ulrich Beck, *Cosmopolitan Vision* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006).
- 25 Hunter, 200.
- 26 Wigg-Stevenson, "Reflexive Theology," 9.

- 27 Christian B. Scharen, ed., *Explorations in Ecclesiology and Ethnography*, Studies in Ecclesiology and Ethnography (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), Kindle loc. 108. This is particularly the case when it comes to issues of power, knowledge, and orthodoxy or racism, xenophobia, and ethnocentrism brought on by the “banal cosmopolitanism” discussed above.
- 28 See Fenella Cannell, ed., *The Anthropology of Christianity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006).
- 29 Jack M. Schultz, “Dealing with theology culturally: a response to Leopoldo A. Sánchez,” *Missio Apostolica* 20, no. 2 (Nov 2012): 158–163; Leopoldo A. Sánchez, “Theology in Context: Music as a Test Case,” *Concordia Journal* 38, no. 3 (Summer 2012): 205–224.
- 30 Mark A. Seifrid, “Beyond Law and Gospel?: Reflections on Speaking the Word in a (Post)modern World,” *Concordia Journal* 43, nos. 1 & 2 (Winter–Spring 2017): 29–42; Joshua A. Hollmann, “Christian Witness in the Present: Charles Taylor, Secularism, and The Benedict Option,” *Concordia Journal* 46, no. 1 (Winter 2020): 57–70.
- 31 Jacob Stoltzman, “An Evaluation of Sin and Forgiveness in Japanese Culture and Its Effects on Evangelism,” *Concordia Theological Journal* 5, no. 1 (Spring 2018): 45–65; Robert Rosin, “Christians and Culture: Finding Place in Clio’s Mansions,” *Concordia Journal* 45, no. 2 (Spring 2019): 21–45; Gregory Dean Klotz, “Dealing with Culture in Theological Formation: A former Missionary in Latin America Reflects on Training Pastors and Communicating the Gospel,” *Concordia Journal* 38, no. 3 (Summer 2012): 244–262; Douglas R. Groll, “From the Margins to the Table: An Anglo Lutheran’s Journey into North American Hispanic-Latino Theologies,” *Concordia Journal* 38, no. 3 (Summer 2012): 225–243; Leopoldo A. Sánchez, “The Global South Meets North America: Confessional Lutheran Identity in Light of Changing Christian Demographics,” *Concordia Journal* 37, no. 1 (Winter 2011): 39–56; Harold L. Senkbeil, “Engaging Our Culture Faithfully,” *Concordia Journal* 40, no. 4 (Fall 2014): 292–314.
- 32 A. Trevor Sutton, “Inclined to Boast,” *Concordia Journal* 45, no. 1 (Winter 2019): 33–44.
- 33 Joel P. Okamoto, “Modern Science, Contemporary Culture, and Christian Theology,” *Concordia Journal* 43, no. 3 (Summer 2017): 45–63; Russell Moulds, “Science, Religion, and God’s Two Kingdoms,” *Concordia Journal* 43, no. 3 (Summer 2017): 36–44.
- 34 Michael Knippa, “No ‘Lions of Gory Mane’: Persecution or Loss of Predominance in American Christianity,” *Concordia Journal* 41, no. 4 (Fall 2015): 293–306.
- 35 Mason Keiji Okubo, “Unity and Diversity: Being a Multicultural Church,” *Concordia Journal* 42, no. 3 (Summer 2016): 203–210; Laokouxiang Seying, “Diversity and Unity in a Multicultural Church: God’s Dream for the Twenty-first Century,” *Concordia Journal* 42, no. 3 (Summer 2016): 193–202.
- 36 Michael Rynkiewich, *Soul, Self, and Society: A Postmodern Anthropology for Mission in a Postcolonial World* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2012); See also Scharen, *Explorations in Ecclesiology*, Kindle loc. 160.
- 37 Rynkiewich, *Soul, Self, and Society*, 247.
- 38 Schultz, “Properly dividing.”
- 39 Robbins, “World Christianity,” 30–33.
- 40 Wigg-Stevenson, “What’s Really Going On.” See also Christian B. Scharen, “‘Judicious Narratives,’ or Ethnography as Ecclesiology” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 58, no. 2 (May 2005): 125–142.
- 41 Wigg-Stevenson, “Reflexive Theology,” 12.
- 42 E-mail correspondence with author, June 29, 2019.
- 43 Brian M. Howell, *Short-Term Mission: An Ethnography of Christian Travel Narrative and Experience*, (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012), 234.
- 44 See Robbins, “World Christianity.”
- 45 *Ecclesial Practices* 1, no. 1 (January 2014).
- 46 Michael Armstrong, “Some Ordinary Theology of Assisted Dying,” *Ecclesial Practices* 5, no. 1 (July 2018): 39–53.
- 47 *Ecclesial Practices* 6, no. 2 (November 2019).

- 48 *Ecclesial Practices Special Issue: Digital Ecclesiology*, 7, no. 1 (April 2020). For other examples, I suggest referring to some of the literature cited in this paper and the annals of the journal *Ecclesial Practices*, which “publishes articles and book reviews at the intersection of ethnographic and other qualitative approaches with theological approaches to the study of a variety of ecclesial practices and contexts of practice.”
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- 50 Engelke, *How to Think*, 244.
- 51 Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977).
- 52 Wigg-Stevenson, *Ethnographic Theology*, Kindle loc. 430.
- 53 See Wigg-Stevenson, “Reflexive Theology.”
- 54 Wigg-Stevenson, *Ethnographic Theology*, Kindle loc. 439.
- 55 D. V. Porpora, “Methodological Atheism, Methodological Agnosticism and Religious Experience,” *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* 36, no. 1 (2006): 57–75.
- 56 See Scharen, “Judicious Narratives.”
- 57 Russel T. McCutcheon, *Critics Not Caretakers: Redescribing the Public Study of Religion* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2001).
- 58 James K. A. Smith, “Foreword,” in Christian B. Scharen, *Fieldwork in Theology: Exploring the Social Context of God’s Work in the World* The Church and Postmodern Culture (Ada, MI: Baker Academic, 2015), Kindle loc. 118.
- 59 Wigg-Stevenson, *Ethnographic Theology*, Kindle loc. 423.
- 60 Scharen, *Explorations in Ecclesiology*, Kindle loc. 123.
- 61 Tim Wallace, “Participating in an Ethnographic Field School,” in Michael V. Angrosino, ed., *Doing Cultural Anthropology: Projects in Ethnographic Data Collection* (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 2007), 178.
- 62 Mary Clark Moschella, *Ethnography as Pastoral Practice: An Introduction*, (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2008), 18.
- 63 Scharen and Vigen, *Ethnography as Christian Theology*, 7.
- 64 Kathryn Borman, Ellen Puccia, Amy Fox McNulty, and Bill Goddard, “Observing a Workplace,” in Angrosino, ed., *Doing Cultural Anthropology*, 83.
- 65 Ken Chitwood, “Building Bridges: Toward Constructing a Christian Foundation for Inter-Religious Relationships in the Shift from Religious Privilege to Spiritual Plurality,” *Missio Apostolica* 22, no. 2 (2014): 226.
- 66 While not perfect, see Stuart M. Matlins and Arthur J. Magida, eds., *How to be a Perfect Stranger: The Essential Religious Etiquette Handbook*, 4th ed. (Woodstock, VT: Skylight Paths Publishing, 2010).
- 67 See Clifford Geertz, “Thick Description: Toward an Interpretative Theory of Culture,” in Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973). See also Jack Sidnell and N. J. Enfield, “How to distinguish a wink from a twitch,” *Hau: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 7, no. 2 (2017): 457–465.
- 68 Amira Mittermeier, *Giving to God: Islamic Charity in Revolutionary Times* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019), Kindle loc. 290.
- 69 Wigg-Stevenson, *Ethnographic Theology*, Kindle loc. 234.
- 70 See Pete Ward, ed., *Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012).