

Pathways project "bends the light" with collaborative research, learning

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Adapted from a peer-reviewed journal article, "Bending the Light: A Methodological Structure for Collaborative Theological Inquiry," recently published in *Ecclesial Futures*.

Through the Pathways for Tomorrow Initiative, the Program for the Future Church (PFFC) at Baylor's George W. Truett Theological Seminary is piloting a novel form of theological inquiry in an integrated research, resource, and relationships hub.

The complexities of communities of faith require integrating theories, methods, and disciplines to give an account of the realities and possibilities of life together. While theology and theological education emerge from reflection on and in service of people of faith, they are often criticized for being abstract and disconnected from real world application, leaving individuals and communities with limited guidance on how to address contemporary social, ethical, and moral challenges. There is a need, as Ted Smith recently argues in *The End of Theological Education*, for new forms to guide theological education and theological inquiry.

The methodological structure that guides our work reflects a practice of collaborative research and learning we describe as "bending the light." Much like a mirror can bend light to shine into dark places, the work of the PFFC seeks to reflect and refract possibility through the practice of gathering and collective engagement in and through theological education. Piloting solutions for emerging and pressing challenges before the Church, we strive to illuminate hope without diminishing or dismissing the complex crisis and challenges our communities carry.



We purposefully describe our work as a "methodological structure." Methodology alone cannot yield the encounter and formation that many of our communities— theological education, more broadly—desire. Structure is also required. Amid calls for new forms of theological education, the turn to structure provides a way to identify the properties, practices, and processes that can orient the methods and integrate the methodology in and for particular communities. The structure and praxis within the "Bending the Light" (BTL) methodology consider how the combination of the convening practices of the PFFC and contextual engagement in a particular location with specific ministry circumstances impacts thoughts and actions. Like light and a prism, theory and practice

are inseparable from the structures they embody and make possible. Reframing the importance of structure acknowledges the transformative capacity of the relationship between theory and action by inviting attention to the conditions that enable individual and collective transformation.

The BTL methodological structure also builds upon and incorporates various insights and contextually-centered sensibilities that emerge from previous attempts to provide a theological account of crises and responses. In this way, BTL connects the existing aspects of the theological enterprise, while also creating a collective imagination that can embrace new possibilities that shape the future of the Church. Our work and orienting methodological structure not only attend to method but seek to draw out the necessary structural conditions that form an alternative social structure where research, resourcing, and relationships can combine within an integrated and contextually-rooted theological research hub.

The process of collaborative research and learning does not always follow a neat and clear pathway. Through our work with students and local partners—three of whom contributed to our peer-reviewed article—we have recognized the need to listen and prioritize a responsive posture. In this spirit, the BTL methodological structure proceeds much like light waves and a prism rather than a singular, straight path. The research process moves like a wave, and the reconstituted sites of collaborative inquiry function like prisms. When light waves travel and encounter a different medium, the spectral properties are affected; each wavelength is bent by a slightly different amount as it passes through the prism. This bending effect separates the incoming white light into its individual colors, creating a spectrum. Similarly, the BTL methodological structure passes the “light” of collaborative inquiry through several different “prisms” to understand the substance and properties of the crises we encounter. When combined with the enlivening and illuminating work of the Spirit of God, new possibilities—for research, learning, and life together—emerge.

The process of collaborative research and learning is ordered by a series of Properties and Practices. First, BTL works to create a new structure that illuminates and transforms communities through three grounding Properties: belonging, place, and worship. The combination of these Properties animates every aspect of the theological structure, and the sites of collaborative inquiry are purposefully structured to include these three elements. When removed, the Practices and Processes described below lose coherence.

Second, the methodological structure, grounded in the BTL Properties, is ordered by BTL Practices that guide the collective community. Across the three prismatic gathering points, nine practices guide the investigation:

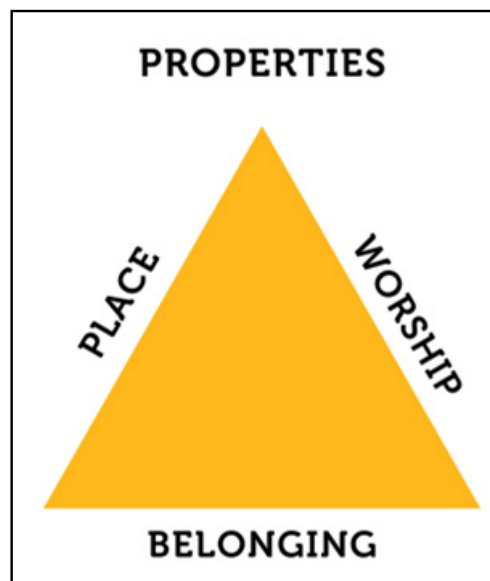


Figure 1: Properties of Bending the Light
(commissioned by Program for the Future Church)

(1) naming present gifts, (2) creating connections, (3) identifying commonalities, (4) clarifying presenting crises, (5) developing shared language amid grief, (6) elevating individual and collective imagination, (7) complexifying anchoring concepts, (8) exploring shared practice, and (9) piloting research and resources. Together, this leads to a holistic exploration of theology and lived experiences.

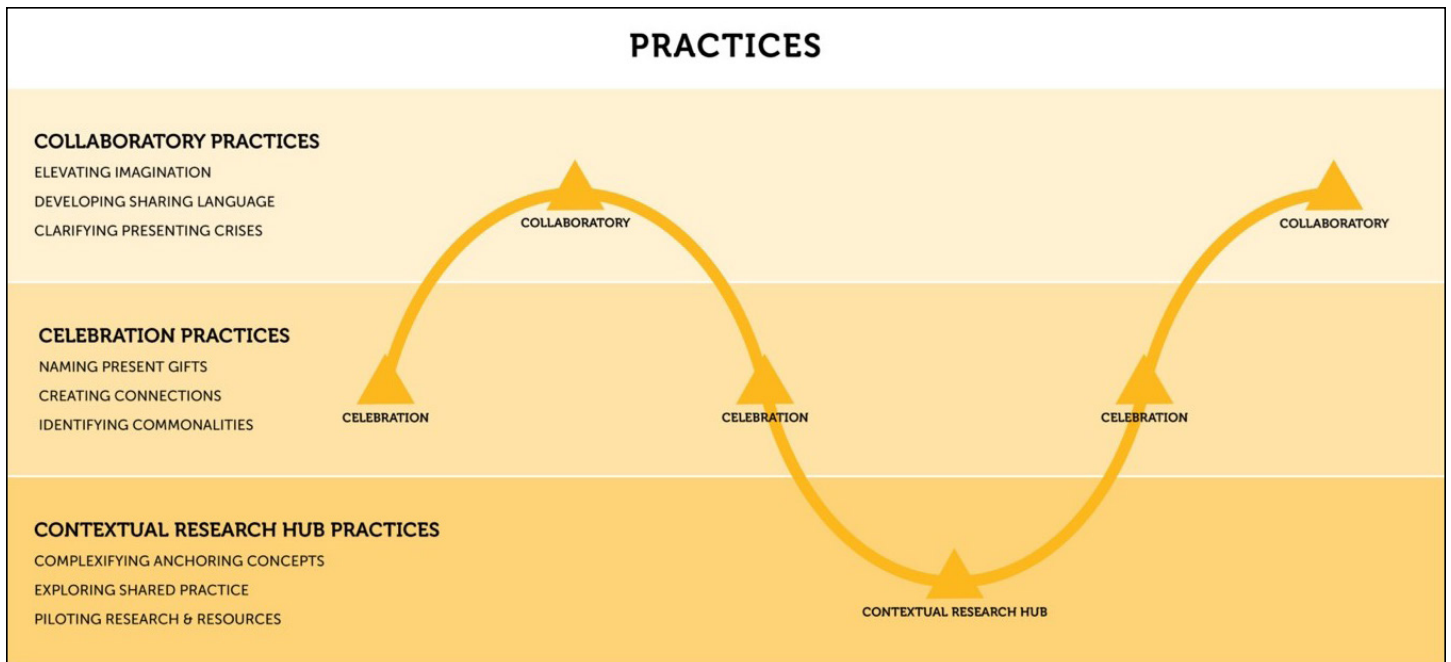


Figure 2: Practices for Bending the Light (*commissioned by Program for the Future Church*)

When combined, the Process, Properties, and Practices that guide the Bending the Light methodological structure support collaborative research and learning for the future of theological education. The BTL offers a structure and form that helps create conditions to support new ways of life; ones that can emerge out of crisis and collaboratively bend the light of our individual and collective imagination toward hope. Simultaneously, the outworking of this Bending the Light draws us toward one another, stirring imagination within the particular people and communities that participate in this work and resourcing communities of faith. This individual and

collective work—theological and social at once—combines to create a method, a mode of convening, and a process for discovery that motivates and guides the work of transformation.

Join us for a [webinar](#) introducing this approach to collaborative research and learning. To receive updates about future research and resourcing from the Program for the Future Church, please join our learning community by [subscribing to our newsletter](#), *Future Church Fieldnotes*.



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