

TOWARD A THEOLOGY OF INSTITUTIONS

David Specht with Richard Broholm

This essay explores Robert Greenleaf's call for a theology of institutions, and his conviction about the important role that religious congregations and seminaries might play in helping to hold organizations in trust around the exercise of their power and prerogative. The authors bring the perspective of many years of involvement in efforts devoted to developing a practical theology of organizational life. David Specht serves as Director of Seeing Things Whole, an action-research effort focused on exploring the intersection of faith, work and organizational life. Richard Broholm, founder of Seeing Things Whole, served as the first Director of the Greenleaf Center, and as a conversation partner to Robert Greenleaf during the latter years of his life. Their essay begins with a brief consideration of the way in which Greenleaf's call for a theology of institutions spoke synergistically to another contemporary effort similarly focused by the conviction that the key to creating a more humane and caring society is the renewal of the servant spirit of existing institutions through the efforts of men and women prepared to serve as regenerative agents with these organizations. The authors identify the two key dimensions of Greenleaf's thinking about how the religious community might mobilize its resources around this task, reflect on key learnings emerging from a ten year effort to develop a working theology of institutions, and suggest possible next steps for continuing this exploration.¹

THE PROBLEM

This particular moment in history is both a terribly auspicious and incredibly exciting moment to be exploring Robert Greenleaf's call for a *theology of institutions*.

Less than a decade ago, the highly-publicized failures of corporate leadership at Enron, World Com, Tyco, Arthur Anderson, and the Roman Catholic Church in the United States dramatically harmed the lives of tens of thousands of persons in and outside of these institutions while at the same time deeply shaking the confidence of the public at large in our nation's institutions and those who lead them. Today's economic meltdown, to a significant extent, represents a similar failure of leadership, as institutions regarded as "too big to fail" have done just that. These failures, now as back then, appear to reflect a fundamental lack of clarity on the part of those in leadership about *what and whom they were holding in trust*. Add to these specific events the high level of ambient anxiety that has permeated our public and private lives since the events of September 11; the fatigue resulting from the ongoing "war on terrorism"; the aftermath of Katrina and Ike, the present economic malaise impacting the lives of families, communities and organizations, and we are faced with a level of collective dispiritedness and lack of confidence in

¹ An earlier version of this essay originally appeared in 2003 as part of the Voices of Servant-Leadership Series and later part of an edited collection entitled *Practicing Servant Leadership* (Jossey Bass 2004)

the commitment and capacity of public and private institutions unmatched since near the end of the Vietnam War.

So it is a terribly auspicious moment to be responding to Greenleaf's call for the development of a theology of institutions. Particularly so because in several instances those whose betrayal of the trust of leadership has been so well publicized have also been active church members. This has been especially painful and wounding irony in those cases where the failure of leadership has taken place within religious institutions themselves.

At the same time it is also an incredibly exciting and provocative time to explore the lively intersection of human spirit, sacred traditions, leadership and organizational life. For it was precisely during the social and political ferment of the late 1960s and early 70s with its widespread apprehension about the trustworthiness of our institutions and those who led them that Greenleaf began to speak and write about the idea of servant leadership and its inextricable link to servant institutions.

THE CALL

THE EMERGENCE OF A CALL FOR A THEOLOGY OF INSTITUTIONS

An idea whose time has come frequently emerges simultaneously from more than a single source, as its essential truth is recognized from a variety of vantage points. This was certainly the case in the emergence of the call for the development of a theology of institutions, which, at least as we experienced it, arrived from two voices.

Robert Greenleaf's perspective was shaped primarily by his life as a student of organizations and leadership, first within AT&T and following that as a consultant to leadership in universities, business, foundations and religious institutions.

In 1970, Greenleaf wrote his seminal essay profoundly reshaping our understanding of the true nature and purpose of leadership, *The Servant as Leader*. Two years later, in 1972, Greenleaf's second essay, *The Institution As Servant* was published:

*This is my thesis: caring for persons, the more able and the less able serving each other, is the rock upon which a good society is built. Whereas, until recently, caring was largely person-to-person, now most of it is mediated through institutions — often large, complex, powerful, impersonal; not always competent; sometimes corrupt. If a better society is to be built, one that is more just and more loving, one that provides opportunity for its people, then the most open course is to raise both the capacity to serve and the performance as servant of existing major institutions by new regenerative forces operating within them.*²

Greenleaf was not alone in recognizing the necessity of raising the servant-capacity of existing institutions. During that same period, from 1964-1974, six Protestant denominations came

² Robert K. Greenleaf, "The Institution As Servant," written in 1972 and republished in *Servant Leadership: A Journey Into The Nature Of Legitimate Power & Greatness*, a collection of the writings of Robert K. Greenleaf. (New York: Paulist Press, 2002), 62.

together at the initiative of American Baptist Church leader Jitsuo Morikawa to form MAP (Metropolitan Associates of Philadelphia), an action research program of the World Council of Churches designed to explore how the church could more effectively relate to men and women who lead and serve in so-called “secular” organizations within an urban context.

Central to MAP’s approach was the recruitment of 125 *Lay Associates* – men and women employed in a variety of organizations from six sectors of the city: Education and Arts; Business and Industry; Social Organization; Politics and Government; Health and Welfare; and Physical Development. 6 *Urban Agents* – clergy salaried by their denominations – were assigned to each of these sectors to support and resource these Associates in identifying key issues shaping the future in their sector of the city. Additionally, there were 8 *Worker Ministers*, clergy who found employment in a variety of “secular” occupations in the political, business, social service and educational sectors of there city.

When asked why the church was becoming involved in secular organizations, Morikawa spoke about institutions in distinctly religious terms:

In order to discern, participate in and celebrate God’s activity in the city. The church today is immersed in talk about mission. But little is being done to test out how laity can participate in mission through the public institutions of the metropolis. If humankind is called to affect history and the reshaping of the world, then men and women in business, political, social, health, educational and physical planning institutions must see themselves under the mandate of calling; a calling to corporate responsibility. This means that every institution is confronted with the pressing question, ‘To what end?’ To what purpose do we produce chemicals, educate children, build highways, elect officials, administer medicine, and provide social services?’³

During its last 5 years, MAP focused its energies on trying to better understand the change process within institutions, and the way in which local churches might offer support and empowerment for laity committed to holding their communities in trust through serving as change agents within the organizations where they worked. They referred to this strategy as their “wager” on the local congregation, and published a resource called *A Strategy of Hope* offering a guide to support the formation of support groups within congregations and change agent teams within their places of employment. These words from the introduction of *A Strategy of Hope* describe their vision for local congregations:

While many organizations have broken down or become destructive, they are, on the whole, ordered ways of serving God’s people by meeting needs and solving problems. We do need them. ... But, in that they have been structured in such a way that they do not serve all of God’s people, but primarily those who are wealthy, white, male and western, they must be changed. In that they are structured in a way which keeps us isolated, alienated and frustrated, they must be restructured. They must be made more human-oriented: they must be humanized. ... The objective of lay ministry is to develop within the Christian Church a new ministry through the laity to the organizations of the secular

³ Richard Broholm, “Trustees of the Universe: Recovering The Whole Ministry of the People of God. (Shelburne Falls, Massachusetts: Seeing Things Whole, 2001), 3.

*world. ... If lay people are to minister to society they will require clergy who can act as enablers of lay action. They will also require the church to provide resources, both human and financial, as well as guidance, training, and support to lay ministry groups. In fact, the entire structure of the church must be open to enabling the ministry of the laity.*⁴

A Strategy of Hope was warmly received by a handful of congregations around the country, but for the most part the support of church members as change agents within their workplace institutions was simply not a priority for the institutional church. After its closing in 1974, Dick Broholm, one of MAP's three Co-Directors, returned to his alma mater, Andover Newton Theological School for a sabbatical time of reflecting on the learnings emerging from the MAP years and to explore the seminary's readiness to somehow pursue this work.

Here he found support and interest among some faculty for a larger vision of ministry – especially from theologian Gabe Fackre and the seminary's dean of faculty, the late George Peck. With their support, the Andover Newton Laity Project was launched featuring an intensive action-research effort involving six local congregations committed to the intersection of faith and work. Throughout these five years, the pastor and five lay members of each congregation met on a monthly basis with five members of the Andover Newton faculty to reflect on their workplace ministries. They identified nine variables — blocking or enabling forces — which functioned within their churches to either positively empower members in their workplace ministries in secular institutions or block them in discovering and responding to this call. The learnings from this action-research effort were published in 1979 under the title of *Empowering Laity For Their Full Ministry* and shared broadly with workplace ministry advocates across many denominations.⁵

In the early 1980s, the Laity Project – by then institutionalized as The Center for the Ministry of the Laity at Andover Newton - launched several task forces of laity and professional theologians in an attempt to further bridge the gap between the church's theology and people's experience in the workplace. By this point I was working with Dick, serving as staff to a task force focused on exploring the implications of this connection, not abstractly, but in the very specific settings of organizations like Digital Equipment Corporation, the Massachusetts State Foster Care Review Unit, the Boston Mayor's Office, State Mutual Insurance, and Tanager Financial. Once again it was evident that the daily workplace ministries of men and women participating in the task force were inextricably linked not only to individual persons, but to institutions as well. It was clear that in order to think theologically about workplace ministry, we would need to begin to think theologically about institutions as well.

We were primed to rediscover in Robert Greenleaf a conversation partner whose thinking and writing spoke powerfully to our own inquiry.

Though not himself a churchman, Greenleaf felt strongly about the role churches could play in the effort to create a more caring society through supporting persons committed to serving as

⁴ Kenneth Vernon, ed., *A Strategy of Hope: Lay Ministry For Organizational Change*. (Philadelphia: Metropolitan Associates of Philadelphia, 1972), 1.

⁵ Richard Broholm and John Hoffman, *Empowering Laity For Their Full Ministry*. (Shelburne Falls, Massachusetts: Seeing Things Whole, 1979).

regenerative agents within institutions. In a letter to encourage the work underway at Andover Newton, he contended that “the fundamental reconstruction of institutions cannot take place without a strong supporting influence from churches. So long as these churches have only a ‘theology of persons’ they cannot wield the needed influence on institutions and their leaders.”⁶

He suggested that the church’s theological preoccupation with individuals tended to focus people’s thinking on “how to ease the hurt of the system, and not enough on how to build a system that can have a positive, growing, liberating, and humanizing impact on people.” Moreover, Greenleaf insisted that critical to the task of building transformed institutions is the faith one must have to risk and move boldly into new and uncharted territories. He wrote, “While science helps calculate the odds on a decision, belief sustains one in the inevitable uncertainties and anxieties which the originator of regenerative action must bear. A theology of institutions could be a vital ingredient informing and shaping a faith which empowers such risk-taking and institution building; it could also be a critical resource in the development, preparation and sustenance of persons who are committed to being regenerative agents within institutions.”⁷

Simultaneous to Greenleaf’s encouragement, Jitsuo Morikawa was also urging Dick Broholm and his staff to pursue the development a theology of institutions.

*The church has commendably focused its theological discipline on the welfare of individual persons, throughout most of its long history, as a sign of the preciousness of every life in the sight of God. Therefore the ministry of the church is concerned and practiced largely as ministry to persons. But today, more than in the past, the fate or welfare of human life is powerfully affected by the institutions of society; in fact the future is being largely shaped by these economic, political and social institutions of our culture, so that the role of institutions, the moral and social accountability of institutions, becomes perhaps the number one agenda in our historical enterprise. How to confront these powerful organizations, which are our greatest achievement, before they destroy us on the one hand, and how to evoke and provoke them to a fresh discovery and discernment of their true purpose and calling, is the task of an American, indigenous, evocative theology.*⁸

At the urging of both Greenleaf and Morikawa, and with the support of a modest grant from the Religion Division of the Lilly Endowment, we began to work more explicitly on the development of a theology of institutions through a series of efforts that continues to this day.

TWO DIMENSIONS OF GREENLEAF’S CALL FOR A THEOLOGY OF INSTITUTIONS

I believe that there are two complimentary aspects of Greenleaf’s call for a theology of institutions, one more pragmatic and strategic and the other more spiritual. In the first we hear

⁶ Richard Broholm, “Trustees of the Universe: Recovering The Whole Ministry of the People of God. (Shelburne Falls, Massachusetts: Seeing Things Whole, 2001), 12.

⁷ Richard Broholm, “Trustees of the Universe: Recovering The Whole Ministry of the People of God. (Shelburne Falls, Massachusetts: Seeing Things Whole, 2001), 12.

⁸ Richard Broholm, “Trustees of the Universe: Recovering The Whole Ministry of the People of God. (Shelburne Falls, Massachusetts: Seeing Things Whole, 2001), 13.

Greenleaf, the lifelong student of leadership and organizational life. In the second, we glimpse Greenleaf, the spiritual seeker, a dimension of his journey which came to fuller and more visible expression through his writings during the later years of his life. Both are suggested in these two sentences from his essay, *The Need for a Theology of Institutions*.

*I do not believe that the urgently needed fundamental reconstruction of our vast and pervasive structure of institutions can take place, prudently and effectively, without a strong supporting influence from the churches. And I doubt that churches as they now stand, with only a theology of persons to guide them, can wield the needed influence. I deem it imperative that a new and compelling theology of institutions come into being.*⁹

A Strategic Vision for Churches and Seminaries

Beginning with his premise that the best way to raise create a society that is more just and loving is *to raise the capacity to service and the performance as servant of existing institutions*, Greenleaf wrestled with the important question of how best to hold institutions in trust in such a way as to awaken this kind of servant spirit. He came to believe that both foundations and religious institutions could together play important strategic roles in helping to realize this possibility.

While elements of his thinking about how this might occur are expressed in several of his writings of the late 1970s and early 80s, nowhere is his vision for this possibility more fully articulated than in an essay entitled “A Fable.”¹⁰ In it Greenleaf imagines representatives of several foundations noting in conversation together that the essential “machinery” to build a healthier society - seminaries, churches, individuals and operating institutions - was in place, but not functioning. They wondered what might be done to enable seminaries and churches to come alive to the critical role they might play in awakening within these religious institutions a servant spirit. Eventually they undertook a campaign: 1.) calling seminaries to their roles as trustees of the larger society through, 2) training church leadership capable of helping to inspire and equip church members, 3) to serve as regenerative forces capable of transforming society’s institutions.

Greenleaf’s vision for seminaries and churches was not rooted in undo optimism for either. Indeed, while his writings reflect a deep respect for the servant leadership quality of individual religious leaders (Abraham Heschel, Pope John XXIII, and John Woolman) they also in other places suggest a sobered regard for church institutions as suffering from self-preoccupation and general ineffectiveness in addressing the needs of the larger society.¹¹ Nevertheless, the combination of his own pragmatism and, I suspect, the influence of persons like Gordon Cosby

⁹ Robert K. Greenleaf, “The Need for a Theology of Institutions,” written in 1979 and republished in *Seeker and Servant: Reflections on Religious Leadership*. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1996), 192.

¹⁰ Robert K. Greenleaf, “Fable,” written in 1983 and republished in *Seeker and Servant: Reflections on Religious Leadership*. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1996), 169-176.

¹¹ This perspective had roots in Greenleaf’s childhood upbringing. In his essay, “Old Age: The Ultimate Test of the Spirit,” he writes, “When I was about 13, I recall listening to a conversation with a committee from our church that had come to try and persuade father to raise his quite nominal contribution. Father listened patiently and then said, “No.” He thought his contribution was about right He was glad the church was there, but as an instrument for doing good in the world, he rated it well below both his labor union and his political party. The committee left in a huff.” *The Power of Servant-Leadership*. (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc., 1998), 265.

(pastor of Church of the Savior in Washington, DC) and Robert Lynn (then head of the Religion Division of the Lilly Endowment) led him to imagine and then advocate for an enlargement of the strategic role of seminaries and churches in raising the quality of life in the world around them.

In reflecting on the process of thinking toward the desirability of this kind of enlarged role for seminaries and churches, Greenleaf wrote “Out of my probings, the idea of a *hierarchy of institutions* evolved. In this hierarchy, I see, at the top, seminaries and foundations. Foundations are in that oversight position because they have the resources and the opportunity to gain perspective that enables them to provide conceptual leadership to colleges and universities ... Seminaries are in a strategic position to give similar support to churches, whose needs are also urgent. In turn, both churches and universities are well placed to give nurture and guidance to individuals and to the whole range of “operating” institutions.”¹²

Greenleaf’s vision for churches and seminaries resonated powerfully with our own earlier efforts to engage a seminary and local church congregations in an exploration of what factors in the life of a congregation function to either enable or frustrate their capacity to support their members in this way. Following the closing of the Center for the Ministry of the Laity at Andover Newton Theological School, this work with congregations lay fallow for more than a decade. More recently, this research around how to strengthen the capacity of local congregations to support their members in drawing upon their faith as a resource to their holding in trust their workplace and community institutions became the centerpiece of an initiative at Luther Seminary in St. Paul. Through their extensive reach as the nation’s largest Lutheran theological school, Luther’s *Centered-Work* initiative sought to engage a large number of congregations around this vision of local churches becoming better able to support their members in linking their faith to their everyday workplace settings within society’s organizations.¹³

A Practical Theology Capable of Undergirding Those Seeking To Hold Institutions In Trust

Greenleaf was convinced that it would be difficult, if not impossible, for churches and seminaries to wield the kind of institution-renewing influence he envisioned so long as its theology was largely individually and interpersonally focused, a focus which he deemed important but

¹² Robert K. Greenleaf, “Seminary As Servant,” a collection of three essays written in 1980, 1981, and 1982, and republished as part of a volume entitled *The Power of Servant-Leadership*. (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc., 1998), 170.

¹³ Greenleaf once observed that a promising starting point for the very large task of improving society through the renewal of a servant orientation with existing institutions would be to identify *a single seminary* genuinely prepared to rethink its training of clergy in order to prepare church leadership capable of inspiring and supporting the men and women around their roles as regenerative forces within society’s organizations. While at first glance this may seem a modest hope, the identification of a single seminary prepared to seriously embrace this challenge is no small matter. While it is not unusual for seminaries to offer intermittent programming (institutes and workshops) directed toward business leaders, these initiatives are largely limited to alongside programs which do not shape or influence how the seminary approaches its more fundamental work of preparing church leadership. This kind of significant reorientation of a theological school’s missional focus demands both strong buy-in, capacity, and perseverance at multiple levels of the seminary including its trustees, administrative leadership, and a critical mass of key faculty. These factors came into alignment for a time at Andover Newton Theological School under the leadership of its president, George Peck, who was a passionate advocate for this vision. Following his untimely death in 1990, however, the seminary’s focus on this emphasis waned. It may be also be the case with the unfolding effort at Luther Seminary also, as changes in leadership and resource pressures have combined to impact Luther’s *Centered-Work* initiative as well.

inadequate to the task of orienting us toward the pressing challenge of holding institutions in trust. In his essay *The Need For A Theology of Institutions*, he worried about the absence of such a theology:

...those who draw their spiritual sustenance from churches and are concerned for preparing people who will care and serve in our complex, tension-torn world have largely extrapolated from the available theology of persons and seem not to have explicitly faced the question of what a committed person does—one who is capable of being a strong quality-building force within our institutions. As a consequence, too much of the effort to care and serve is directed to easing the hurt of the “system” that is grinding people down faster than the most valiant rescue effort can help the; and too little caring effort is going into building a “system” (institutions) that will have a positive growing effect on people ... How can a contemporary theology of institutions be brought into being, one that will encourage, prepare, and support committed people to make careers inside institutions as initiators of regenerative quality-building action?¹⁴

It is this second dimension of Greenleaf’s call for a theology of institutions – the task of developing a theological understanding of institutions capable of undergirding the commitment and informing the perspective of those who would hold institutions in trust – that became the focus of our own efforts.

ONE EFFORT TO DEVELOP A PRACTICAL THEOLOGY OF INSTITUTIONS

Our approach to this undertaking was informed by a simple premise and a difficult problem. Our premise was that any genuinely useful theology of institutions would necessarily emerge from the collaborative engagement between those whose center of gravity is primarily within the religious tradition (mostly seminary faculty and church leaders) and those who spend the great majority of their time preoccupied with the life and performance of the organizations where they work. An adequate theology of institutions can emerge only from an exploration which engages both of these worlds – the theological tradition and the world of organizations - with genuine care and respect.

The difficult problem is to pull this off. Our experience of the engagement of these two worlds with one another was that it was exceedingly difficult to achieve the desired balance. Too often, in engaging the world of secular institutions, the church tends to either blandly and uncritically affirm organizations and their leaders or, on the other hand, to err in the opposite direction of regarding and addressing institutions with an indiscriminately critical and unforgiving eye.

These unfortunate alternatives reflect a broader societal tendency noted by John Gardner when he wrote about institutions being trapped between those persons (often on the inside) who are comfortable, complacent and unwilling to see the institution change, and those prophets (usually on the outside) who insist that the institution must change or else they will burn it down. He de-

¹⁴ Robert K. Greenleaf, “The Need for a Theology of Institutions,” written in 1979 and republished in *Seeker and Servant: Reflections on Religious Leadership*. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1996), 193.

scribed this as the battle between "the uncritical lovers" and the "unloving critics" suggesting that "love without criticism brings stagnation, but criticism without love brings destruction."¹⁵

Perhaps because of an awareness of these two equally undesirable tendencies, in our experience, the thoughtful engagement of clergy and organizational leaders (particularly business leaders) tended to not happen at all. Business leaders tended to shy away from the conversation, suspecting that their organizational world was of no real interest to their pastors, or more problematically, regarded by clergy with suspicion, as being fundamentally unworthy of their respect. For their part, clergy, while curious, did not pursue this engagement, in part because they felt ill prepared for the engagement, uncertain what they might bring of value to conversations about complex and frequently high-stakes dilemmas facing the women and men who sat in their pew on Sunday.¹⁶

We were convinced, then, that in order to develop a theology of institutions capable of undergirding the church's commitment to hold institutions in trust, it must emerge from a different kind of engagement between church leaders and lay people with operational responsibility within secular organizations. It must emerge from a conversation in which organizational leaders experience their messy worlds and the consequential decisions they face in these settings being held in trust through an engagement marked both by respect and rigorous engagement.

We were also clear that an essential test of the adequacy of any theology of institutions which emerged from this engagement would be the extent to which it offered a basis for the development and support of "loving critics" capable of holding institutions in trust. One may hold an organization in trust either as a regenerative agent who works from within or as one who accompanies these organizations in a trustee role. Either way, the work of holding an institution in trust demands that one brings a larger sense of one's role and purpose in the world and, similarly, a larger vision for the role and purpose of their institution in the greater scheme of things. A theology of institutions must help us to make this essential connection between that which is of pressing and immediate concern and what, on the other hand, is of ultimate importance.

Given these clarities, we determined that our approach toward developing a practical theology of institutions should meet the twin criteria of being *tangibly grounded in organizational life* and *clearly informed by theological perspective*.

- To ensure that the effort was tangibly grounded in organizational life and experience we:
1. held our meetings onsite at the workplace settings of participating organizations.
 2. focused our reflection around consequential and unresolved real-time issues presented by participating organizations.
 3. oriented our engagement toward the goal of holding one another's organizations in trust around their well-being and their impacts on constituents both within and outside of the organization.
 4. worked to ensure that the majority of those participating in our meetings had ongoing operational or trustee responsibility for real organizations.

¹⁵ These words are drawn from John Gardner's 1968 address at Cornell University, recalled in *A Strategy of Hope: Lay Ministry For Organizational Change*. (Philadelphia: Metropolitan Associates of Philadelphia, 1972), 48.

¹⁶ Laura Nash and Scotty McLennan do a wonderful job of exploring this disconnect in opening sections of their book, *Church on Sunday, Work on Monday*. . (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 2001).

5. adopted as a key ground rule for our meetings an agreement to maintain the confidentiality of our conversations in order to permit frank engagement around issues of importance

To ensure that our effort was clearly informed by theological perspective we:

1. sought to identify theological conversation partners from seminary and church settings capable of bringing:
 - commitment to this exploration of the interface of theological tradition and organizational life
 - curiosity, good listening skills and an attitude of fundamental respect to the messy world of organizational life and its dilemmas
 - insight and knowledge of the theological tradition and the capacity to make it accessible
2. worked with theologians to identify relevant concepts or premises within our particular theological tradition capable of reshaping our understanding of organizational life and its purposes.
3. developed a theological model of organizational life translated into secular language for use within organizations as a framework for seeing things whole in a way that recognizes legitimate and often conflicting interests, and worked with organizations around its integration and use.
4. developed a process for enabling men and women to gather around an organization and its leaders for the purpose of holding the organization in trust around a difficult challenge facing it.

What follows is a brief description of what this effort has yielded to date and how it has come to expression in the life of a particular organization.

FOUR THEOLOGICAL PREMISES FOR THOSE WHO WOULD HOLD ORGANIZATIONS IN TRUST

We have come to identify several theological premises which shape the way we regard institutions and consequently how we engage them. These premises form the basis of a *practical theology of institutions*, constituting a theology capable of informing our practice. I think it is also important to recognize that they reflect our speaking out of our own particular faith tradition as Protestant Christians. While our experience is that the essential truth of some of these premises resonate with similar truths emerging from other religious traditions, our expression of them does in fact derive from a particular religious perspective, one which we do not regard as normative or authoritative for people whose religious persuasions are different from our own.

Having acknowledged this, here are four premises (some perhaps provocative) that we believe are important elements of a practical theology of institutions.

Premise #1: Institutions are part of God's order. Walter Wink, a biblical scholar whose writings on the *powers and principalities* have powerfully shaped our theological understanding writes of institutions: "These Powers are the necessary social structures of human life, and it is not a matter of indifference to God that they exist. God made them. For this

reason ... the account of creation in Genesis does not end in chapter 2, with the creation of the world, but in chapter 10, with the creation of the nations ... The meaning is clear," he concludes. "Humanity is not possible apart from its social institutions."¹⁷

Premise #2: God loves institutions. As part of God's world, institutions are the object of God's love. However, it is not enough to say God loves institutions in an abstract or general sense. Our tradition understands God's love to be not only a universal attribute of the divine, but also the essence of God's intimate concern for each of us as individuals. Believing that God's love is both universal and particular, we are compelled to declare not only that God loves institutions in general, but that God loves each institution in all of its messy particularity.

From my perspective, the implications of this assertion are stunning! They begin to become apparent when you try out the premise by completing the statement, "God loves _____" with the name of particular institutions.

God loves the New York Fire Department. God loves Johns Hopkins Hospital. God loves the AARP, the NAACP and NASA. God loves Landry's Bicycles and Reell Precision Manufacturing. So far, so good.

What goes on for you, however, when you make the same affirmation for other, perhaps less likely, institutions? God loves Enron, WorldCom, or Tyco? AIG, CitiBank, General Motors and Chrysler? If you are anything like me, this latter assertion may leave you a little edgy. Nevertheless, I believe it is true, and that rooting ourselves in this conviction offers an important basis for the kind of compassionate regard for organizations that is capable of enabling us to hold them in trust as critical lovers.

Premise #3: Institutions are living systems. The affirmation that institutions are living systems links two important assertions, both fundamental to seeing institutions whole. The first is that *institutions are alive*. To say this is to recognize that the "being-ness" of institutions is comprised not only of its more tangible outward and physical reality (e.g. its facilities, people, formal organizational and information systems, technology and equipment), but along with this a less-tangible interiority or animating spirit whose energy is reflected through a combination of historical memory, shared convictions and dreams, proud successes and bitter disappointments. This animating spirit (spoken of by others as an organization's DNA or culture) is enduring, a red thread persevering through the institution's storyline over time, and must be well understood by those who would seek to hold the organization in trust.

The other assertion of this premise is that *institutions are systems*. As such they are wholly interdependent with the entire evolving world around them, both impacting and affected by everything that takes place throughout the constantly emerging reality of the existing order. A fundamental mindfulness discipline of healthy organizations is maintaining a consistent awareness of these twin dimensions of the institution's utter interdependence with the natural and made world around it: both its fundamental dependence upon that world, and the inevitable intended and unintended consequences of its decisions and actions upon that same world.

¹⁷ Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 66. In his own footnote, Wink credits this important insight to Hebrew Scripture scholar Gerhard von Rad. 66.

Of course, the recognition of institutions as systems also has significant implications for the way we understand the internal life of organizations-as a whole comprised of a constant and dynamic interdependence of countless elements exercising conspicuous or invisible influence on one another.¹⁸ The three-fold model organizational life developed by Seeing Things Whole and presented later in this essay is a theological recognition of the systemic nature of organizations.

It is around this awareness of organizations as systems (and as existing within systems) that we find particularly relevant both Greenleaf's reminder that the root meaning of the word religion (*re ligio*) is re-bind, and his recognition of the importance of seeing things whole as the basis for this.¹⁹

Premise #4: Institutions are called and gifted, they are fallen, and they are capable of being redeemed. Here we have three important theological assertions about the nature of organizations embedded in a single statement. While each is essential in its own right, they are presented here together for an important reason.

Institutions are called and gifted: As expressions of God's dynamic and unfolding order, institutions are here for a reason. They are intended to be instruments of God's healing and reconciling purposes, and are both gifted and called to serve to the common good in particular ways. They exist for good purposes, they are capable of good things, and good things are expected of them.

Institutions are fallen: As members of God's order, institutions are prone, to inflating themselves, forgetting their membership in the larger community of God's creation, and to acting in ways that neglect or harm the common good. In this sense, they are much like each of us, capable both of great good and immeasurable harm.

Institutions are capable of being redeemed: Unlike the first two dimensions of this assertion which to many may appear self-evident, this third is clearly a statement of faith. No matter how unlikely, how apparently fallen or broken, institutions are capable of reawakening to their own best possibilities. Part of holding an organization in trust is reminding it of its own best possibilities, and calling back toward a recommitment to this potential. This particularly difficult when the institution's collective sensibilities have become anesthetized by the gratification of their narrower self interests, paralyzed by fear or anger, or burdened by the shame of past failures.

¹⁸ Here we are particularly indebted to Russell Ackoff and Margaret Wheatley for helping us to come alive to the systemic nature of life in general and of organizations in particular.

¹⁹ Our thinking about the systemic nature of institutions was also strongly influenced by Russell Ackoff's counter intuitive insight about systems in which he indicated that if any individual part of the system is functioning as well as it can be, then you can be sure the system as a whole will not be. And conversely, if the whole system is functioning as well as it can, the individual parts will not be.

Fundamental to holding an organization in trust, particularly around its brokenness, is the recognition that all three of these realities—that the institution is gifted and called, that it is fallen, and that it is capable of being reawakened to its best possibilities—all three of these exist in every institution. Moreover, they exist not as mutually exclusive truths, but rather they *coexist simultaneously* as possibilities within the life of each institution, each present in some measure at any given moment in the organization's life.²⁰

A THEOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK FOR SEEING THINGS WHOLE IN ORGANIZATIONAL LIFE

A theology of institutions should do more than offering us a basis for reflecting from the perspective of religious faith on the nature and purpose of organizations while looking in on them from the outside. Ideally it should be capable also of informing the perspective and decision-making of those who would serve as regenerative agents operating within.

Here, of course, we come up against an important recognition: namely, that those who work within our organizations far from being spiritually homogeneous represent instead an exceedingly rich mosaic of religious and spiritual orientations and secular philosophical and value driven orientations. From the perspective of the organizational leaders with whom we were working, while organizational decision-making and performance consistent with their own sacred ideals was highly desirable, they were committed to pursuing this in a way that did not impose their personal religious belief system on their co-workers. "What we need," they said, "is a non-religious way of gaining theological perspective together on the challenges and decisions we face.

Our approach to this was to discover a theological model of organizational life that could then be translated into secular language for use within organizations as a framework for seeing things whole. We found that framework in the theological notion of the *threefold office of Christ*. The threefold office of Christ, attributed to theologian John Calvin, identifies the roles of Prophet, Priest and King as three essential dimensions of the life and ministry of Jesus. These same roles are prominent in Hebrew Scripture, each representing both a unique expression of power and way of mediating God's relationship with Israel and the surrounding world. In early conversations searching for a theological framework for understanding institutions, Andover Newton theologian Gabriel Fackre proposed the Threefold Office as one possibility²¹, in part because it was one of the early ways of the Christian Church describing its own institutional life (the Body image is another). It also gained currency because it resonated strongly with institutional leaders, who found it aptly describing normative dimensions of organizational life.

In consultation with Fackre, we developed non-religious language describing these three dimensions in organizational life while still reflecting the theological tradition. Each of the dimensions

²⁰ Here again we are indebted for this insight to Walter Wink, *Engaging The Powers*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 65-85.

²¹ For a fuller description of the theological roots of this model, see Gabriel Fackre's essay, "Christ's Ministry and Ours," published as part of a collection entitled *The Laity In Ministry: The Whole People of God for the Whole World*. (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1984). 109-125.

represents a cluster of preoccupations, associated stakeholders, core values, and ways of exercising power that are characteristic in organizational life. There are predictable and legitimate tensions among these three areas, and at times these tensions can operate destructively within the life of the organization. In a healthy organization, these dimensions function not as separate fiefdoms within the institution, but rather as a commonwealth of collaborative service. When any one area loses sight of this fundamental interdependence with the other dimensions, it is prone to a more destructive expression of its concerns. The three dimensions include:

The Identity (Priestly) Dimension of Organizational Life: Theologically, this office represents an understanding of Jesus as high priest who, having experienced the vulnerability of the human condition, offers his life as a sacrifice capable of restoring to wholeness the brokenness in the divine-human relationship. This dimension is primarily concerned with healing, wholeness and well-being of the gathered life of the organization. The primary stakeholders associated with this dimension are those who work for the organization. Its preoccupations include a concern for how the organization structures the character and quality of its gathered life; how it creates an environment that reflects its core values, and how it draws members of its workforce toward their fullest potential. This would include how the organization designs its work spaces; how it recruits, hires, evaluates, rewards, and dismisses its employees; how it disseminates information; how it distributes power and assigns accountability; and how it models investment in and commitment to the values it professes. Marks of faithfulness in this dimension include explicit acknowledgement of the values and principles guiding the life of the organization; those who work for the organization personally resonate with these values; private and public life congruent with these values; and the capacity for honest self reflection, including recognition of instances when the organization has some measure failed to uphold its values.

The Purpose (Prophetic) Dimension of Organizational Life: Theologically, this office represents an understanding of Jesus as the prophet who, bears witness to an alternative order, and includes both the articulation of a compelling vision and a critique which recognizes the dissonance between things as they are and what ought to be. Whereas the Identity dimension of organizational life is inwardly focused, the Purpose dimension is focused outward, on the organization's interface with and impact on the world around it. The primary stakeholders associated with this dimension are its customers or clients, its suppliers, its competitors, and the natural and human communities whose lives are in some way affected by the organization. Its preoccupations include a concern for the clarity of the organization's vision and mission; how it structures the processes for producing a "good" that is needed and valued by others; how it markets or sells this good; and how it serves the client and the wider world — in short, how the organization justifies its existence to the larger world around it. Marks of faithfulness in this dimension include a mission that offers a serious response to real needs in the world around it; accountability to the world around it for the exercise of its mission; an understanding of service that leaves those served better informed, less dependent and more empowered in the exercise of their own capacities.

The Stewardship (Royal) Dimension of Organizational Life: Theologically, this office represents an understanding of Jesus as ruler. Whereas other kings had most often used their power to make things happen in a coercive way, bending persons and institutions to their will, Jesus modeled a fundamentally different understanding of leadership in which serving,

empowering, facilitating, and persuading are primary tools. Here we encounter the Greenleaf's reminder that the true leader is before all else the servant, an understanding that while gaining broader currency is still far from the norm. In organizational life the primary stakeholders associated with this dimension include management, owners, and trustees. Its preoccupations include a concern for how the organization secures and utilizes its resources (human, financial, and material) so as to sustain its viability while balancing the legitimate needs of each of its stakeholders and the wider community. Marks of faithfulness in this dimension include decision-making and actions that express confidence in the long-term sustainable future of all stakeholders; governance marked by inclusivity; and structures and systems which constantly evolve to sustain the capacity of the organization to utilize its unique gifts in service to the world around it.²²

It was our work with the threefold model that led us to posit a fifth theological premise relating to the nature of faithfulness in organizational life and performance. **Premise #5: Faithfulness in institutional life is predicated upon the recognition and management of multiple bottom lines.** Success in organizational life cannot be measured by performance related to a single bottom line. Seeing things whole in organizational life necessitates recognition of multiple dimensions of institutional life and performance. Each of these dimensions represents fundamental accountabilities, multiple bottom lines in an ongoing dynamic relationship that is inevitably characterized by some degree of tension.

The challenge of balancing the legitimate concerns associated with these multiple bottom lines came into focus in a dramatic way at Engineered Products²³, a company with whom we had been working around the use of the three-fold framework as a tool for seeing things whole around important organizational decisions.

“I remember at one point we were bidding for a major contract,” Ed, the GM of Engineered Products, recalled. “This was not a new contract. It was a product we had already been producing for one of the Big Three auto manufacturers. We were competing to retain the contract to produce this component. The stakes were high for us, because not only had we engineered it, but we had, of course, heavily invested in the machinery for producing it. Moreover, this product represented more than 15% of our business. We felt we couldn't afford to lose this contract. Our customer, on the other hand, was committed to maximizing their own bottom line by pressing for the lowest possible bid on the product, so the competition between our company and our competitor—a company we respect a lot—was fierce. They had structured the bidding process to encourage a race to the bottom—every time they would receive a bid from one of us, they would turn around and show it to the competitor and invite them to try to beat it.

“Because of this, the bidding got ridiculously low—so much so that we had pretty much cut our profit margin out of the proposal in an effort to get our numbers down. Nevertheless, our competitor came back with another bid that was even lower than ours. You have to understand that at

²² For a fuller expression of this model, including the “shadow” expression of each of its dimensions, see *Three-Fold Model of Organizational Life: Testimonies and Queries for Seeing Things Whole* by David Specht and Dick Broholm. (Shelburne Falls, Massachusetts: Seeing Things Whole, 2001).

²³ Engineered Products is the fictitious name for a real company, one of several we have worked with during the past ten years in an action-research effort exploring the use of the three-fold model of organizational life as a framework for supporting faithful organizational decision-making in a performance.

this point, our adrenaline was flowing. Our team went into a marathon session to make our proposal irresistible. Because we had already given up our profit margin on the product, the only way we could sweeten our proposal was to offer cost reductions on other product lines we provided for this manufacturer. We were so bent on winning, however, that we didn't hesitate to do even this. It was a momentum thing.

“It wasn't until a few hours later, after we had faxed out this final proposal that the full impact of what we had just done came home to us. In order to win the business, we had given away the earnings margin which supports our research and new product development and our employees' gain-sharing compensation plan—the very things that help to make us so competitive. We looked at each other and said, ‘What have we just done!?’ And at that point, we knew there was only one thing we could do. We called our customer and withdrew our proposal.

“Our competitor won the contract and we're glad they did. They have taken a beating with it. We're fortunate that we came to our senses in time. That's when it became clear to us that in order for our company to stay healthy, we have to pay attention to more than just one bottom line.”

A PROCESS FOR HOLDING INSTITUTIONS IN TRUST

During the past fifteen years, a network of colleagues from across the United States has developed around this exploration of the intersection of moral deliberation, spiritual imagination and organizational life. Those involved include organizational leaders, theologians, and organizational development practitioners. For a number of years they came together twice a year during this time for the purpose of sharing ideas and experimenting with different approaches for gaining theological perspective on organizational life.

During the past four years, this practice has been further refined and takes place within the context of round tables for seeing things whole. The round tables, one in the greater Boston area and another in the Twin Cities each consist of several organizations whose leadership teams gather on a rotating basis in one another's settings for half-day meetings in which members hold one another's organizations in trust around a pressing challenge facing the host organization.²⁴

The longer weekend gatherings take place over a two or three-day period. Participants come together at a conference center or at the facility of the host organization over a light supper on the evening of the first day, usually a Friday, some having traveled considerable distance for the sole purpose of serving someone else's organization. Old friends greet one another, and typically a few new friends are welcomed into the circle for the first time.

Following supper, representatives of the host organization guide a walking tour through their facility, allowing participants to soak in the organization's atmosphere and perhaps in some way catch glimmers of its spirit through the arrangement of its work spaces, from the photos on walls,

²⁴ A description and facilitator's guide to this process for holding an organization in trust has been published as a monograph entitled *A Theological Reflection Process for Illuminating Organizational Faithfulness* by Richard Broholm, Dale Davis and David Specht. (Shelburne Falls, Massachusetts: Seeing Things Whole, 1996).

and expressions on the faces of nearby employees. Participants then regather for a time of orientation in preparation for their work of the next day.

They are reminded by the facilitator that they have been called to gather as a circle of temporary trustees, whose purpose for the next 24 hours is to hold a member organization in trust around a difficult challenge it is facing. As temporary trustees their role is not to “solve the problem” by offering expert advice about the dilemma facing the organization. Rather they are to draw upon their own lived experience and the sacred ideals and lore of their faith traditions for wisdom and perspective and inspiration which may be a source of encouragement and guidance to the leadership team of the focus organization as they wrestle with the challenge that will be described.

They are reminded of the importance of listening deeply with ears and hearts, and of maintaining a discipline of confidentiality. They are invited to be mindful that they have, by virtue of the intentions they bring and the trust they are about to assume, entered together into sacred time and sacred space.

And then, for the remainder of that evening, they continue the process begun earlier through the walking tour of meeting the focus organization as its leadership team shares stories of the organization’s beginning (For what reason did it originally come into existence?); its purpose (Who does it serve, and how?); its employees (Who does the work, and what is it like for them to work here?); critical or defining moments in the organization’s history; and, ultimately, the challenge which currently faces them as an organization.

The rhythms of these trustee gatherings are familiar. The participants are weary from the fullness of their own workweeks and their travel to be here on a Friday evening. And yet, to a person, they lean forward in their chairs, eyes alive, as they drink in these stories, attuning themselves to the unique character of this particular organization, its journey, and the challenge before it.

On this particular weekend, we were gathered to hold Engineered Products in trust. Ed, their general manager, began his evening presentation by referring to our walking tour earlier that evening through their manufacturing plant. “Do you know the last line we stopped at? The one where you met some of the folks assembling our product? Eight months from now, these folks will no longer have jobs here at this plant. We’re moving these lines to Mexico. We’ve got to in order to meet the price downs demanded by our customer. We simply can’t squeeze any more cost savings out of this line without reducing the direct labor costs associated with it. We’ve struggled to gain every efficiency we can, and simply don’t have any options left. And it’s killing us. These are our people. They’re good at what they do, and some of them have been with us for a long time. And you want to hear something really scary? We don’t know how long we’ll be able to stay in Mexico either. Because everything is already migrating to China, where the additional savings on labor are impossible to ignore.”

Ed went on to remind participants of the recent history of Engineered Products, a firm which develops high-tech components for the transportation industry. The great majority of their business had been with Big Three U.S. auto manufacturers. They had gained a reputation for

producing a technically superior product, and had done well despite increasing pressures related to industry changes.

“Things began to change dramatically six or seven years ago as the Big Three, in response to the competitive pressures they were experiencing from particularly the Japanese auto industry, began to aggressively seek savings from their suppliers—companies like us. Initially, we were able to respond for the price-downs our customers were demanding by tightening up our manufacturing process. This was actually a good thing for us and our customers had a right to expect it. We’re really proud of the quality and efficiency of our manufacturing operation. This has not been enough for our customers, however. The pressures were enormous, and it hasn’t always been easy to keep our head.

By the time of this gathering, the relationship between Engineered Products and their customers had undergone a complete metamorphosis, moving from a mutually beneficial collaboration between customer and supplier, to one that felt more like the wary relationship between predator and prey. “Our customers began to demand access to our books in order to determine what additional cost savings we might be able to achieve. They were demanding a ‘down payment’ of \$300,000 or \$400,000 or more on the cost savings we would deliver over the life of the contract, with the regular stipulation being that we would guarantee between 5-10% additional cost savings for each year of the product. Many of our competitors were going out of business, and we were focusing nearly all of our engineering resources toward our manufacturing process. This was at the expense of research and new product development, something we’ve always been known for and taken pride in. This inability to better protect our R&D has come back to haunt us.”

“Have you considered simply not complying with your customer’s demand for a price-down?” one trustee inquired.

“Yes,” Ed responded. “In fact, as a leadership team we had determined that the next time we were asked to deliver a price-down that was impossible to achieve without damaging the company, we would refuse. We didn’t have to wait long.”

“What happened?”

“When we received product order, the customer had simply written in a 5% cost reduction that they had not negotiated with us. We responded indicating that we could continue to provide the product and the existing price.”

“And what did they do?”

“They gave the contract to a competitor. We didn’t blink, and we lost. This is why we can’t see any option to relocating this product line to Mexico. We simply can’t afford to lose it, and there’s no other way of achieving the price-down they’re demanding.”

“Do you have any new product launches that can replace the line that’s leaving?”

“No. That’s what I mean about our inability to better protect our R&D. In the past, we’ve been able to replace departing products in our North American facility with new product launches, and in that way have been able to keep our people working. This time, we don’t have anything ready to go.”

The leadership of Engineered Products had come to describe their organization in terms of three dimensions—a model of organizational life with theological roots. The three dimensions—Identity (the character and gathered life of the organization), Purpose (how the organization serves the world around it), and Stewardship (how the organization relates to its resources and governs itself)—each represent a cluster of legitimate concerns that frequently exist in some measure of tension with one another. Three bottom lines which must be held in creative balance by those who would hold organizations in trust. Each of these dimensions also represents clusters of typical stakeholder (Identity: employees, their families, and communities; Purpose: customers, suppliers, and competitors; Stewardship: owners, managers, stock holders) whose needs and interest are similarly in tension.

At this point, the 30 men and women who had gathered to hold Engineered Products in trust moved into three working groups, each focused on one of these three dimensions of Engineered Products’ life. Each group was accompanied by a member of Engineered Products’ leadership team, present to answer questions and provide additional information. They were asked to reflect on three questions, and to report back on any insights that emerged for them.

The questions were:

- Who are the primary stakeholders associated with your area?
- What do they care most about?
- What might it mean to faithfully engage them around the related challenges of :
 - The job loss related to the movement of the product line.
 - The continued pressures toward price-downs and competing as a global company.

As you might imagine, the meeting of each of these working groups was unique, focused as they were by the stakeholder groups whose needs were quite different from one another. The meeting focused on the Identity dimension of Engineered Products was particularly dynamic, as participants joined Engineered Products leadership in worrying about the implications for those whose jobs would be lost as the result of relocating the product line. One of the tangible decisions facing EP’s leadership around this was the question of when to tell employees working on these product lines that their jobs would be moving to Mexico.

This conversation took a surprising turn when one of the participants with some hesitation, offered this reflection. “Your dilemma got me thinking about something Robert Greenleaf wrote in his initial essay *The Servant as Leader*. I want to preface it, though, by letting you know of the enormous respect I have for your management team and for the obvious integrity and great skill you are bringing to your leadership in a very difficult situation. I have some appreciation of the kind of very difficult market pressures you are dealing with here. We are also facing them in our own industry, but my sense is that they are not as acute as those you have been wrestling with in the auto industry. We are proud to be associated with you.

“At one point in his essay, Greenleaf observed that a central ethic of leadership is that of foresight, and said something to the effect that if you find as a leader that you are facing a dilemma with no good options to choose from, then it is almost certain that at some point earlier on you stood in a crossroads – maybe not recognizing it at the time - where your decision or lack of decision somehow contributed to getting you where you are now. Assuming that may be true, I wonder how it would be at some point for you to reflect as a leadership team on when those moments of decision-making might have occurred. With the benefit of hindsight, do you recognize now decisions that you were faced with then that had you made them differently, things might have—*might* have, not *would* have—unfolded in a way that left you with better options to choose from in this moment. The point in doing this is not to beat yourselves up, but rather to lay any burdens down that you might unconsciously be carrying around and to harvest any learnings you can, because I don’t think these market dynamics are going to change anytime soon.”

• • •

Early the next week, Ed and his leadership team met to reflect together on the insights and questions emerging from the conversations of the past weekend. Several days later, they gathered their employees for one of their occasional brown-bag luncheon meetings. After offering a general update on overall market conditions, Ed told the employees that he knew that many of them were anxious about the possibility of their jobs disappearing with the anticipated movement of products lines to their plant in Mexico, and he wanted to give them as much information as possible to help them plan for the transitions that some of them would be facing. He shared with all of the employees the rough schedule for the staged movement of these lines over the course of the next 10 months. He acknowledged that the next scheduled product launches were far enough away to prevent any smooth transition, and that consequently most of these jobs would be lost for the foreseeable future, and then outlined preparations the company was making to help those losing jobs to find new employment. Already, as a result of conversations with other local industries, they had identified a need for 30 employees with similar skill-sets.²⁵

Ed then went on to say, “Obviously, this is painful, and we hoped it would never come to this point. We worked hard to prevent it, and while there are lot of good decisions we have made over the last several years, we have not been perfect. In looking back, there are a couple of decisions that, had we made them differently, may have helped us to avoid this.” After describing a few of those decisions, Ed concluded saying, “Again, while in looking back we found a lot to feel good about, those particular decisions I just described are ones we wish we had made differently.”

When I asked Ed what kind of response he received from the employees, he said, “At the end of the meeting, one of the folks who’s scheduled to lose her job stood up and said, ‘This is why we

²⁵ While the identification of alternative employment opportunities for a limited number of their people may at first glance appear a modest accomplishment, in truth this was a significant “success” in the light of the over-all failure to be able to change the larger course of direction. If survival or financial success was the only consideration flowing out of pre-occupation with the concerns of the Stewardship dimension they might well have missed the opportunity to make a difference in the lives of these departing employees. This strategy emerged out of conversations focused on the Identity dimension of their company’s life, with its concern for the well-being of staff, and underscores the importance of keeping all three dimensions on the table during these difficult conversations as a support to seeing things whole.

like working here. You've always been up front with us.' When you go out on the floor, spirits seem remarkably good."

"You know," Ed continued, "The group coming together to hold us in trust that weekend was incredibly important. Part of it is that it is a great group of folks, who bring so much wisdom and insight to bear on our situation. But a lot of things we talked about, we'd already been thinking about before the gathering. This time, though, we were talking about our situation in the midst of a community. In hearing ourselves describe our situation to you all, we somehow felt the impact more powerfully, and we felt accountable to a wider community for doing everything we possibly could about it."

SOME NEXT STEPS

While the learnings from all of these efforts represent a good initial step toward the development of a practical theology of institutions, it is clear that there is much work yet to be done. From our perspective, there are several fronts that feel particularly important and deserving of our attention. They represent a recognition of the importance of both deepening and broadening the conversation.

Language and Sacred Ideals: From the outset our conversations within organizations have been framed with the non-religious language of ethics, purpose and values. This reflects a conscious decision, arrived at in conversation with our organizational partners, to cast the conversation as inclusively as possible, to enable broad participation from employees throughout organizations, regardless of their own personal religious or spiritual persuasions. For this reason, the *Three-fold Model of Organizational Life*—at its root a theological framework—has been translated into non-religious language, and used as a framework for eliciting and organizing the core values of a given organization.

Leaders within some of the organizations with whom we have been working have expressed the belief that this three-fold framework is more universal than might first appear, given its theological roots in the Reformed Christian tradition. It also seems to connect, using a different language of interpretation, to the religious traditions of Judaism and Islam. The challenge that confronts us is how to explore these possible connections without trivializing the depth and profundity of each tradition, on the one hand, and discovering a way to learn from the rich uniqueness of each, on the other.

The first challenge might be met by having Jewish and Islamic scholars examine the three-fold model from their religious traditions to determine its usefulness and relevance. The second challenge, of discovering ways to learn from the rich uniqueness of one another's traditions, especially within the context of the organizational environment where people work together, is a little more daunting.

Our colleagues have expressed the hope (and at the same time their ambivalence) that we might deepen the conversation about organizational faithfulness within a given organization by discovering ways of inviting employees to draw upon their own religious and spiritual traditions as a wisdom resource to critical organizational decisions. Theirs ambivalence (and our own) reflects an awareness of how easy it is for such conversations to become divisive, particularly when participants share their own religious perspective in ways that suggest that it ought to be authoritative for others in the organization.

During the past two years, our organizational round table gatherings have featured a more explicit "theological reflection" focused by the use of readings from a variety of religious and spiritual traditions. Texts have included readings from Christian, Jewish and Muslim scriptures, Sufi Islam, Jewish mysticism, and Buddhist writings, as well as poetry, Shakespeare, and even writings exploring the mystery of quantum science. Through a discipline of utilizing diverse traditions, participants have become increasingly comfortable drawing on their own religious and

spiritual and moral centers as an explicit resource to their contributions during these conversations, enriching and deepening our shared reflections.

The texts themselves are sometimes read aloud, at others presented as a slide show with music, and become the basis for a group reflection quite independent from the story of the organization's challenge. Only after the sacred text has been explored separately do participants then return to the question of how these two narratives – one the sacred narrative of this real organization's live journey and the other a narrative from a religious or spiritual tradition – speak to one another, pose questions of one another, provoke one another. The dialectic in this reflection often enough breaks open new understandings not only of the organization's story and challenge, but also of the religious text and tradition itself.

Another promising resource for supporting such a conversation resides in the work and research of Dr. Douglas Schoeninger and his colleagues who have been developing "rules of dialogue". These rules are grounded in the belief that each person, whether they acknowledge this or not, is a child of God and, as such, has a unique contribution to make and a truth to share that can enrich the whole. Therefore, it is important for individuals both to feel free to speak their own truth and to provide hospitable space for others to speak their truth. The "rules" Schoeninger has been developing, when agreed to by participants in the dialogue, help to create a safe space where people can risk sharing ideas that are not fully formed in the understanding that one's truth is never finished.

We believe the best place to begin experimenting with these "rules" is an on-going work group within the same organization where they have already established a trust level and respect for each other's contribution to decision-making. In accepting and using the "rules", we believe participants would establish a structure for safe dialogue that might enable them to consciously draw on their unique sacred beliefs and traditions and discover what they share in common as well as new ideas to deepen their common and individual journeys. We hope to test this thesis this year.

Forming Religious Congregations That Empower Servant Leaders and Enable Servant Institutions

As noted earlier, in Bob Greenleaf's vision of servant leaders serving as regenerative agents in developing servant institutions, he saw an essential role for religious congregations. In his essay *The Need for a Theology of Institutions*, he wrote, "I do not believe that the urgently needed fundamental reconstruction of our vast and pervasive structure of institutions can take place, prudently and effectively, without a strong supporting influence from the churches."

The reality, however, is that very few congregations of any religious tradition are committed to and structured for the equipping of their members for service in their day-to-day workplaces. Even fewer congregations recognize and affirm the critically important role their members can play in serving as regenerative agents in building servant institutions. As Greenleaf recognized, this failure is in large part due to the absence of a theology of institutions. It also reflects the orientation and training provided by seminaries where clergy are prepared for their leadership roles in congregations. And finally it is a function of the way most congregations are structured

so that their principal focus is on their interior life and the needs of the congregation as institution.

In collaboration with Luther Seminary's Center for Life-long Learning in a new initiative called Centered Life-Centered Work, Seeing Things Whole has shared the fruit of its research and the emerging model for how temporary trustees can hold an organization in trust. This model is now being tested in the east and mid-west to determine its relevance for both secular organizations as well as religious congregations which are open to becoming centers of support and empowerment for their lay members in their role as institutional servant leaders.

In addition, Lumunos (formerly *Faith At Work*), a national organization of clergy and laity, has undertaken a three-year research project with seven congregations to explore how the congregation can re-structure itself to become the kind of empowering model envisioned by Bob Greenleaf. These findings will be shared over the next three years in the Faith At Work magazine as well as with the leadership at Luther Seminary in St. Paul

We have a long way to go to realize Bob and Jitsuo's vision for religious institutions and the way they can serve to support and inspire a society of servant leaders and servant institutions. But his vision is a compelling one and his insights continue to lend depth and urgency to our efforts. Someday, in the not too distant future, we trust we will see the emerging realization of his dream”

*“The movement I hope to see is when all institutions will become more serving of all persons they touch, to the end that those being served will grow as persons: while being served they will become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants.”*²⁶ (*The Need For A Theology of Institutions*)

Richard Broholm and David Specht

Richard Broholm and David Specht have collaborated with one another for more than 25 years exploring the ministry of the laity in daily life and work, including the implications of religious faith for organizational life.

Beginning with their work through The Laity Project at Andover Newton Theological School in Massachusetts, they continued working together as this project was institutionalized as The Center for the Ministry of the Laity, where Dick served as Executive Director and David served as Director of Publications and editor of *Centering*. The Center offered both published resources and educational programs designed to support men and women in identifying and claiming implications of their faith for their daily work in “secular” workplace settings. It also pursued inquiries into the nature of this intersection of faith, work and organizational life through several task forces involving both theological faculty and lay people from various workplace settings. A task force on Ministry in Economic Sector, began in 1980. Another, beginning in 1983, focused on

²⁶ Robert K. Greenleaf, “The Need for a Theology of Institutions,” written in 1979 and republished in *Seeker and Servant: Reflections on Religious Leadership*. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1996), 198.

the Content of Ministry – the question of what it really means to regard as “ministry” the work of engineers, legislators, publishers, accountants, attorneys and general managers.

In 1984, Dick Broholm met with Robert Greenleaf and soon after became part-time staff for the Center for Applied Studies (predecessor to the Greenleaf Center), a role he served alongside his responsibilities with the Center for the Ministry of the Laity. One outgrowth of this arrangement was the formation at the encouragement of Robert Greenleaf of another task force, this one focused on the exploration of a Theology of Institutions.

In 1993, Dick and David began The Theology of Institutions Project as an effort devoted to further exploring the theological nature and purpose of institutions and how such understanding might support and inform those seeking to hold organizations in trust from within. The project was renamed Seeing Things Whole in 1996, with David assuming the role of Director. Over the past 15 years they have worked with a network of theologians and clergy from a several denominations and organizational leaders from around the United States in exploring the implications of religious belief for organizational life and performance, a work that continues to this day. Central to this effort has been an intensive action-research collaboration with 10 organizations from around the country to explore the intentional use of theological frameworks along with explicit core values as a resource for supporting faithful organizational decision-making.