

The Collective Nature of Religion

with T. Ryan Byerly and Meghan Byerly, “The Collective Characters of Religious Congregations”; and Joshua Cockayne and Gideon Salter, “Praying Together: Corporate Prayer and Shared Situations.”

THE COLLECTIVE CHARACTERS OF RELIGIOUS CONGREGATIONS

by T. Ryan Byerly  and Meghan Byerly

Abstract. Our primary aim in this article is to advocate for the interdisciplinary study of the collective character traits of local religious congregations, taking as our focal example local Christian congregations. It should be clear that such study presently lies on the frontier of interdisciplinary religious studies. Yet, as we will attempt to show in the first section, the way has been paved for the study of such collective character traits through salient developments within several academic disciplines in recent decades. This frontier, in other words, is open for exploration, and there are available tools that can help us explore it. We will illustrate how such exploration may be undertaken fruitfully in the second section by focusing on two distinct kinds of virtuous collective character traits of Christian congregations: traits that enable a congregation to fulfill its distinctive role in the *missio Dei*, and traits that enable a congregation’s members to flourish in their interpersonal relationships. In each case, we will identify a candidate collective virtue of the relevant type, discuss its nature from philosophical and theological perspectives, and, drawing on relevant empirical research, provide reason for thinking that applying empirical methods to it can yield additional insights about its value.

Keywords: church; collective character; inclusiveness; reconciliation; religious congregation; virtue

Our primary aim in this article is to advocate for the interdisciplinary study of the collective character traits of local religious congregations, taking as our focal example local Christian congregations. It should be clear that such study presently lies on the frontier of interdisciplinary religious studies. Yet, as we will attempt to show in the first section, the way has been paved for

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the study of such collective character traits through salient developments within several academic disciplines in recent decades. This frontier, in other words, is open for exploration, and there are available tools that can help us explore it. We will illustrate how such exploration may be undertaken fruitfully in the second section by focusing on two distinct kinds of virtuous collective character traits of Christian congregations: traits that enable a congregation to fulfill its distinctive role in the *missio Dei*, and traits that enable a congregation's members to flourish in their interpersonal relationships. In each case, we will identify a candidate collective virtue of the relevant type, discuss its nature from philosophical and theological perspectives, and, drawing on relevant empirical research, provide reason for thinking that applying empirical methods to it can yield additional insights about its value.

EMERGING INTEREST IN COLLECTIVE CHARACTER

For some time now, the virtue revolution has been gaining momentum in philosophy, theology, and the human sciences. As Christian Miller and Angela Knobel put it,

Research on character has exploded in recent decades, especially in the fields of psychology, philosophy, and theology. From discussions of virtue ethics in philosophy to the situationism debate in psychology to the role of the divine in moral formation in theology, interest in character seems to only be increasing with each passing year. (2015, 19)

A growing partnership in the study of character is also detectable. Not only does the study of character span *across* disciplines, but it is also becoming increasingly *interdisciplinary*, in the sense that there are cooperative efforts between scholars of various academic disciplines studying character together. This work has been spurred on, in part, through the efforts of intentionally interdisciplinary projects with large funding budgets such as the Character Project and the Beacon Project at Wake Forest University.

Notably, the primary focus of this work has been on the character traits (and, more broadly, the well-being) of individuals. Questions that dominate are questions about the nature and value of character traits that are or could be possessed by individual persons. By contrast, the attention thus far given to collective character traits—character traits possessed by groups as opposed to individuals—pales in comparison. Nonetheless, even here, growing interest is detectable in light of developments in several academic disciplines. In this section, we will highlight some of these developments in order to demonstrate that the time is ripe for the kind of interdisciplinary study of the collective characters of religious bodies we are advocating. What we are suggesting, roughly, is that the same

kind of cooperative, interdisciplinary investigation be applied to questions about collective character, and in our specific case, the collective characters of Christian congregations, that has been applied to individual character.

The Philosophy of Collective Character

We begin by highlighting recent developments in the discipline of philosophy, where interest in collective character has only recently surfaced but is rapidly growing. Building on the large philosophical literature on collective belief, collective action, and collective responsibility, several philosophers have recently turned their attention to the topic of collective virtue and vice. Especially influential here is Miranda Fricker's (2010) article on institutional virtues.

Fricker explains that from a philosophical perspective, one of the central debates about collective character is the debate between summativists and antisummativists. Both parties recognize that it is sometimes appropriate to ascribe character traits such as honesty or thoroughness to collective entities, just as well as to individuals. Where summativists and antisummativists differ is over their views regarding the correct explanation for such ascriptions. Summativists maintain that for any ascription of any character trait *T* to a collective entity *C*, that ascription is ultimately made appropriate only because individual members of *C* possess character traits (e.g., *T*) privately as individuals. On such views, in order to account for why ascribing *T* to the collective entity is appropriate, it is not necessary to refer to group-dependent properties—properties that can only be exemplified given the existence of a group. Antisummativists, by contrast, maintain that in at least some cases the correct explanation for why ascribing a character trait *T* to a collective *C* is appropriate will have to reference group-dependent properties. Fricker defends an antisummativist view, appropriating parallel arguments from the literature on collective belief. In particular, she maintains that an institution's policies and procedures can be set up in such a way that members of the institution, *qua* members of the institution and even *only qua* members of the institution, act in ways characteristic of a trait *T*, though they wouldn't do so as private individuals—using the example of the racism of the metropolitan police as an example. In such cases, it is appropriate to ascribe *T* to the collective entity, and the correct explanation for doing so must reference group-dependent properties. Specifically, it must reference properties that the members of *C* possess only *qua* members of *C*.

Fricker's work has exerted significant influence, especially in the philosophical subfield of epistemology. It is within this subfield that there has been the most attention given to collective character, with monographs and edited collections recently published on the topic (e.g., Lackey 2015;

Green 2016). Debate continues between summativists and antismmativists, and there is growing interest in studying both the basic nature of collective epistemic character traits in general as well as in analyzing specific epistemic character traits, such as epistemic justice (e.g., Anderson 2012). Much of the philosophical contribution of the second half of the present article could be viewed as contributing to this latter project of conceptualizing certain particular candidates for collective virtues.

One example of a more recent philosophical work that has built upon Fricker's discussion to address foundational questions about collective character in general is our own, Byerly and Byerly (2016). In that article, we developed additional arguments for antismmativism, provided our own analysis of the basic nature of collective virtues, and identified a distinction between different kinds of collective virtues. It is especially our previous work on the latter two topics that we will draw upon in the discussion below.

First, with respect to the topic of the basic nature of collective character traits, we earlier proposed that, just like the basic nature of an individual character trait, a collective character trait consists in a disposition, or tendency. Specifically, it will consist in a disposition of the collective to display a wide range of characteristic behaviors (understood in a liberal sense) under a wide range of triggering circumstances. We left open what makes a character trait a *virtue*, though we pointed to conceptions of virtue defended in the literature, such as Jason Baehr's (2010) proposal that virtuous character traits are those that make their possessors excellent members of their kind. We will follow this idea below, conceptualizing the collective virtues of local Christian congregations as tendencies these congregations can possess to display a wide range of characteristic behaviors in a wide range of triggering circumstances, which make these congregations better *as* local Christian congregations. A parallel approach, we suggest, may be applicable to other religious bodies.

Second, with respect to the topic of classifying distinct kinds of collective virtues, we noted that there is a basic distinction to be drawn between collective virtues that have individual virtue analogues and collective virtues that do not. Collective virtues that have individual virtue analogues are virtues that can be coherently ascribed to both collectives and private individuals. Examples plausibly include thoroughness and cautiousness. Collective virtues that do not have individual virtue analogues are virtues that can be coherently ascribed to collectives, but not private individuals. We pointed to character traits of collectives that regulate how their members interact with each other, such as collective self-regulation and collective solidarity, as examples. These traits we called "distinctively collective virtues," and we suggested that some of the most interesting work to be done by collective virtue theorists might focus on them. This is because, by contrast with collective virtues that do have individual virtue analogues, accounts

of the nature of distinctively collective virtues cannot be copied straightforwardly from accounts of individual virtues. We cannot say that for a collective entity to possess a distinctively collective virtue *V* is just for it to have the same disposition as individuals who possess *V*, since by definition individuals cannot possess *V*. The collective virtues we will discuss below are plausibly understood as candidates for distinctively collective virtues of Christian congregations. Each of the examples we focus on illustrates a disposition the congregation has that regulates the interactions of its members.

The Theology of Collective Character

A second academic discipline that has contributed to the interdisciplinary study of individual character has been theology. In this section, we identify recent work in Christian theology that is relevant to the study of collective character—specifically, the collective characters of Christian congregations. While space does not permit us to explore resources from other theological traditions pertinent to the study of the collective characters of religious bodies representing those traditions, we would find it surprising if Christian theology were unique with respect to its interest in collective religious character.

We begin with the well-known observation that the twentieth-century revival of interest in virtue within philosophy sparked various reactions in Christian theology. Jennifer Herdt (2015), for example, identifies three distinct strands of contemporary Christian virtue ethics, all influenced in significant measure by the revival of philosophical interest in character. One of these strands she calls “Particularist Theological Virtue Ethics,” which she associates with Protestant theologians and in particular Stanley Hauerwas. We wish to highlight one important aspect of the work of Hauerwas and his followers that is especially relevant for the study of the collective character of Christian congregations. It is a feature of their work that is also shared with other contemporary theologians who may not identify with Particularist Theological Virtue Ethics.

The feature we wish to identify is a stress on the role of the local Christian congregation in the characterological formation of congregants. For Hauerwas and his followers, the Christian community plays a paramount role in any adequate conception of Christian character. As Herdt puts it, “Particularists focus on the Church as the site for the formation of genuine virtue” (2015, 228). It is only within such a community, and indeed via intentionally crafted communal practices, that one grows in Christian virtue. The emphasis here is on “the gradual, grace-enabled formation of Christian virtues and character through communal practices and narratives, notably through the liturgical and paraliturgical practices of the Church” (Herdt 2015, 228).

While the virtue-ethical focus of Particularist Theological Virtue Ethicists has thus far concentrated on individual virtues, the strong communal element of their thought invites reflection on the collective character of congregational communities. For, their work takes very seriously the commonsensical idea that the character and well-being of an individual is intimately bound up with those communities of which she is a part—especially her local Christian community and its distinctive practices. From the Hauerwasian perspective, Christian communities can do a better or worse job crafting collective practices and procedures that will promote the flourishing of their members. An excellent and unique volume that bears out these emphases is Hauerwas and Wells's *Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics* (2011).

These ideas about the interdependence of the well-being and character of individual Christians on their local communities are also reflected in the work of other contemporary theologians who may not identify with Particularist Theological Virtue Ethics. One striking example is furnished by Warren Brown's and Brad Strawn's *The Physical Nature of the Christian Life* (2012), which we regard as the single book that most closely approximates the concern for the interdisciplinary study of the character of Christian congregations we are advocating. The authors echo the concerns of Particularist Theological Virtue Ethicists, though they go further to explicitly employ the language of collective character. They develop an extended analogy between various kinds of "dynamical systems," including ant colonies, families, and churches, stressing the way in which transformation can proceed from the system to its members. When it comes to families and churches, they will even apply the language of character to the system, writing, for example, that some families are "optimistic and openly inclusive" (123), while others are not. Of the church, they say:

A genuine church body, as in the Body of Christ, is considerably more than a loose association of independent persons. It is a self-organized interactive network of persons with properties of the whole body that extend far beyond the capacities and characteristics of individual members. And, to the degree that a particular church body has some genuine causal effect on the world around it, the effect emerges primarily out of self-organizing patterns The direction of influence and cause is mostly from the whole (the characteristics of the church body) to the parts (the Christian character and spiritual life of the individuals). (2012, 130–31)

We find here not only echoes of Particularist Theological Virtue Ethics, but echoes of antisummativism as discussed by philosophers.

The aforementioned theological work is of course typically informed by the Christian Scriptures, which themselves deserve some attention here. In these texts, the believing community is often presented as a unified entity that attempts to grow in virtue, especially in the virtues that reflect the community's commitment to and relationship with God. One prominent

way this view is articulated is through the different organic metaphors that are utilized to describe the believing community, such as the unfaithful wife, the vine, the wayward child, and the Body. Much could be said about each of these metaphors, but the metaphor of the Body is an especially popular reference for Pauline theology, contemporary theology, and theology expressed by local congregations.

One place where Paul's theology of the Body is described is 1 Corinthians 12. In this passage, Paul is arguing against the tendency of the church in Corinth to try to organize itself based on a culturally presupposed hierarchy of giftedness/status (11:18–21) and attainment of wisdom as defined by the world around it (3:18). For Paul, the church cannot choose its organization itself as its organization is bestowed by the Spirit: the church is like a body whose head is Christ. The body metaphor is not unique to Paul—its origins can be found in the works of Hierocles, Maximus of Tyre, Plutarch, and even Plato and Aristotle (McVay 2000). But Paul departs from the metaphor's prominent Stoic uses by describing a system in which, because the head is Christ rather than an individual in the community, all members are equal to one another and every member is to serve one another. In this Body, each member has a gift that is both individual (for the member) and communal (for the whole), and the gift is given to the individual *qua* member in the community. Here, the interdependence of individual and collective well-being is clear. The believer who tries to grow in virtue autonomously will be as capable of achieving this virtue as a severed hand is capable of achieving its purpose. Also clear is the idea that the church's well-being is in part a function of how its members are related to one another—an idea that suggests the potential applicability of the notion of distinctively collective character traits referenced above. In contemporary Christian theology, then, informed by the Christian Scriptures, we find a stress on the interdependence between the character and well-being of individual congregants and the collective character and well-being of the local congregation.

We conclude this subsection by highlighting a final development in contemporary Christian theology that is directly relevant for the interdisciplinary study we are advocating, but in a different way from the developments thus far cited. The final development we have in mind is the turn of interest in the theological subfield of ecclesiology toward what is sometimes called “practical ecclesiology” (e.g., Healy 2000) or “ecclesiology from below” (Haight and Nieman 2009). As Nicholas Healy explains, “in general ecclesiology in our period has become highly systematic and theoretical . . . [displaying] a preference for describing the church's theoretical and essential identity rather than its concrete and historical identity” (3). In contrast, Healy's proposed practical-prophetic ecclesiology, along with similar variants that have been practiced by other theologians, “focuses theological attention upon the church's confused and sometimes sinful daily

life and engages with other traditions of inquiry and their embodiments” (154–55).

In recent years, research fitting this description has grown exponentially, with the publication of research volumes (e.g., Ward 2011), textbooks for instruction (Swinton and Mowat 2016), and the scholarly journal *Ecclesial Practices: The Journal of Ecclesiology and Ethnography*, as well as the creation and growth of professional societies such as the Network for Ecclesiology and Ethnography. In many if not most cases, this research concentrates attention on local Christian congregations, recognizing that these typically do not live up to the normative standard for what the Church should be, with the ultimate aim of helping these congregations better approximate the ideal. We identify this development, not primarily because the study of collective character has been an explicit, central focus of this research thus far (indeed, it has tended to focus primarily on collective practices—cf. Swinton and Mowat 2016, ch.1—rather than collective character traits), but rather because it illustrates the existence of scholarly capacity for undertaking the research we are proposing as well as growing experimentation with methods of study that may prove useful within the proposed research. In this way, alongside recent developments in Christian theology that underscore the potential significance of undertaking interdisciplinary study of congregational character, recent developments also suggest a growing capacity for undertaking this kind of study—especially its empirical elements.

Collective Character in the Human Sciences

Building upon the previous remarks regarding practical ecclesiology, we emphasize here the obvious point that the interdisciplinary study of collective character is incomplete without the efforts of the human sciences, just as the interdisciplinary study of individual character is incomplete without the efforts of the same. In this subsection, we aim to identify developments in the human sciences generally that provide evidence of interest in and capacity for studying collective character. We focus primarily on the emergence and maturation of Positive Organizational Scholarship (POS) as a subfield of organizational studies, but along the way we also reference more general features of the field of social psychology relevant to the study of collective character.

Gretchen Spreitzer and Kim Cameron, in their Introduction to the *Oxford Handbook of Positive Organizational Scholarship* (2011a), note that “positive organizational scholarship” is an umbrella term, and in particular that different practitioners of POS think of the “positive” element of their approach in different ways. Of special pertinence to our project are those scholars whom these authors characterize as conceptualizing the “positive” element of their POS as a focus on “exploring virtuousness and eudaimonism” within organizations. Studies exemplifying this approach

examine both virtuousness *in* organizations and virtuousness *through* organizations. Citing several examples, Spreitzer and Cameron write:

Studies of virtuousness *in* organizations focus on individuals' behaviors in organizational settings that help others flourish. . . . Studies of virtuousness *through* organizations focus on practices and processes in organizations that represent and perpetuate what is good, right, and worthy of cultivation. (2011a, 3, italics original)

As Spreitzer and Cameron emphasize, part of the explanation for the emergence of POS was the lack of attention to certain kinds of outcomes in organizational scholarship. For example, prior to the emergence of POS, "outcomes such as psychological, social, and eudaimonic well-being . . . were largely outside the purview of mainline organizational science" (4). These concepts were to become characteristic places of focus, however, for at least many practitioners of POS.

Two aspects of POS are especially noteworthy for our purposes. The first is the emphasis—shared with the research we have highlighted in contemporary philosophy and Christian theology—placed on the way in which organizations can implement policies and procedures that shape the well-being and character of their members. For example, Spencer Harrison (2011) describes how collective routines of brainstorming and leadership exercises of intentionally problematizing followers' views can increase participants' creativity and curiosity. Edward Powley (2013) provides evidence that the use of open-space technology can promote the establishment of new connections and relationships among organizational members where such connections have previously been damaged or severed. Adam Grant (2012) has documented how interventions that increase employee contact with beneficiaries of their work also increase their motivation at work. Stephen Brammer et al. (2007) have discovered strong links between businesses engaging in corporate citizenship (doing good for the community) and employees engaging in organizational citizenship behaviors (proactively helping colleagues in the organization). Indeed, more generally, it has been found that, over time, employees tend to reflect the "cultures" of their work organizations (Czaplewski et al. 2016). As such, an organization's culture can have a profound influence on its members' well-being and character.

This kind of top-down influence that forms individuals within groups has of course also been a major concern of social psychologists quite generally, even from the early days of the discipline. Muzafer Sherif, for example, widely regarded as a founding contributor to the field of social psychology, maintained a longstanding interest in studying the ways in which apparently individual psychological processes are in fact highly dependent upon group processes. This is illustrated, for example, in the studies of the autokinetic-effect he undertook in his dissertation (1935), which may

be interpreted as illustrating that individuals quite literally *see* things differently depending upon how the groups they are a part of see things, as well as through his well-known Robbers Cave experiments (Sherif and Sherif 1964), which have continued to influence social psychologists to stress the way in which discriminatory behaviors tend to originate in group rather than exclusively individual processes (cf. Oakes et al. 1994). Sherif's influence in these respects continues to be strong today, especially in the social identity approaches of social identity theory and self-categorization theory (Platow et al. 2015). This interest in studying top-down influence, exhibited both in social psychology generally and in POS in particular, is reflective of the similar interest in the interdependence of individual and collective well-being we have seen in contemporary philosophical and theological research.

A second feature of POS that is noteworthy for us is the following. Among the most persistent calls for expansion and further development in the field of POS is a call for positive organizational scientists to focus their attention specifically on studying collective character as such. To be sure, some research within POS has focused on measuring and studying character at the collective or organizational level. This is true, for example, of Lilius et al. (2011), who examine how compassionate practice can be institutionalized. Still, this research is more the exception than the rule. Spreitzer and Cameron write that “given the importance of the ‘O’ in POS . . . our hope is that future research will escalate the conceptual and empirical development of POS-related constructs at the group, unit, or organizational levels” (2011b, 1042). They similarly write, specifically with regard to strength and virtue constructs familiar from Positive Psychology, that “future research . . . can focus more precisely on the ‘O’ level of analysis” (2011b, 1044). Likewise, in Cameron's more recent (2017) contribution focused specifically on organizational compassion, he notes that “most research has occurred at the individual and dyadic level of analysis” (431) and he proposes that “research thus far has only scratched the surface in examining the various indicators and attributes of compassion in organizations. A putative definition and an empirically valid measurement instrument are necessary for the foundation to be built” (430). One can also find calls for the development and implementation of empirically valid measurement tools for studying organizational gratitude (Fehr et al. 2017) and organizational forgiveness (Fehr and Gelfand 2012).

It should be clear from these examples that positive organizational scientists do regard the study of collective character traits as falling within their research purview, and they have begun to make inroads in advancing this study, even if this study is only in its “toddler stage of development” (Cameron 2017, 430). Our purpose here is to direct similar attention to the study of collective character traits specifically within religious congregations—a context which has received comparatively little attention

from positive organizational scientists. We propose that the developments cited in the field of POS, in addition to recent developments in philosophy and theology cited above, have set the stage for this interdisciplinary investigation.

EXAMPLES OF COLLECTIVE VIRTUES OF CHURCHES

In this section, we will identify two candidate collective virtues that might be possessed to a greater or lesser degree by local Christian congregations.¹ Our approach is to identify traits that make salient contributions to important functions that it is widely thought churches are supposed to fulfill. We thus attempt to approach the topic in an ecumenical spirit, aiming to start the work of the interdisciplinary study of collective Christian character by focusing on traits likely to be viewed as virtuous by adherents of many Christian denominations.

For each candidate virtue, we will offer a brief discussion of the theological, philosophical, and scientific foundations for studying the trait. In terms of theological foundations, our primary aim is to show that a promising theological rationale can be given for thinking of the trait as a virtue. In terms of philosophical foundations, we aim to articulate the nature of the relevant trait in such a way that it clearly belongs in the domain of collective character traits as conceptualized from a contemporary philosophical perspective. Finally, in identifying scientific foundations for studying each trait, our primary aims are to illustrate how scientific study of similar topics has already been undertaken, and to offer suggestions for how such study might be adapted for purposes of studying the specific traits in view in the specific context of the local congregation.

Collective Inclusiveness

The first candidate collective virtue we will call “collective inclusiveness.”² It is one example of a trait that fits within the broader category of virtues that enable congregations to fulfill their distinctive function in the *missio Dei*, or mission of God.³ While we will discuss the definition of collective inclusiveness momentarily, simply conceiving of it as fitting within this broader category of traits already enables us to state and defend the theological rationale for thinking that it is a virtue of local Christian congregations. Namely, collective inclusiveness makes a vital contribution to enabling congregations to fulfill their specific function within the *missio Dei*, and traits that enable this should be regarded as virtuous traits of churches.

It is widely recognized by contemporary theologians that a, if not *the*, function of the Christian church is to participate in the divine mission. Paul Collins remarks that “Church and ‘mission’ are understood today by many if not all Christians as virtually synonymous” (2008, 623). Or, as

Cathy Ross expresses it, “the church comes to be the church as it engages in mission; that mission is constitutive of the church itself” (2017, 510). Mission is not some special activity that the church does, and it is certainly not relegated to the work of a few specific members of any congregation. Rather, mission is what the church is. The very identity of the church is that body of Christians participating in the divine mission. Collins writes, “God the Holy Trinity is always the primary sending agent, and the church itself is sent” (633).

Yet, while the very identity of the Christian church is bound up with participation in the *missio Dei*, it is equally clear that not every local congregation of Christians is equally missionally oriented. Indeed, the ideas that congregations can do a better or worse job conceiving of themselves as participating in the divine mission and can do a better or worse job fulfilling their distinctive roles within that mission are widely represented. This is especially vivid in the recent history of the Anglican Church, where a series of church reports has highlighted the absence of missional orientation in many local churches, and has sought to advocate for increased missional orientation. For example, the 1984 report *Giving Mission its Proper Place* claimed that “each Church ought to understand itself as a body of people who have a mission” (Anglican Consultative Council Standing Commission on World Mission 1984). And the 2004 *Mission-Shaped Church* report (2004) continued this emphasis, highlighting five specific qualities that churches could cultivate in order to enhance their participation in the mission of God. Accordingly, the idea that a trait of a congregation that enables it to fulfill its distinctive role within the *missio Dei* should be conceived of as making that congregation a better member of the kind of thing it is—a local Christian congregation—is well-represented. Given the philosophical account of the nature of collective character traits discussed in the section “Emerging Interest in Collective Character,” it would follow that traits of this kind would be virtues of churches.

Our proposal here is that the trait of collective inclusiveness is among the traits that enable a local Christian congregation to fulfill its distinctive function in the *missio Dei*, and so is a collective virtue of Christian churches. Our task in the remainder of this subsection will be to offer an account of the nature of collective inclusiveness and to identify relevant scientific research in organizational psychology that is indicative of the fruitfulness of empirical study of this trait.

An inclusive church is one that seamlessly integrates its members, in all of their particularity and uniqueness, into its collective pursuit of fulfilling its distinctive role in the *missio Dei*. For a congregation to be inclusive it must already be missionally conscious. It must conceive of itself as missional and have some collective understanding of its distinctive role in fulfilling the divine mission. Otherwise, there is nothing for it to include its members *in*. Inclusiveness itself is a kind of function from members to mission. The

inclusive church presumes that every member has a contribution to make to the collective pursuit of fulfilling the church's distinctive role in the *missio Dei*. It invests its energy in understanding who its members are and especially what their gifts are so that it might resource and empower each of them to partner together with others in the congregation in pursuing mission. In a phrase, collective inclusiveness is a church's tendency to seek to understand the distinctive identities of each of its members, including their particular potentialities for contributing to collective mission, and to strive to enable each of its members to partner with other congregants in applying their distinctive identities to the task of fulfilling the church's distinctive function within the *missio Dei*.

As with other collective character traits, we propose that individual congregations may possess collective inclusiveness to greater or lesser degrees. Some congregations are more inclusive than others. An important question is: what are some of the marks or elements of inclusiveness? How, in more concrete terms, can a congregation exhibit inclusiveness? We must be very careful in offering an answer. For it must be stressed that, in the same way that the character traits of individuals can issue in a wide variety of distinct behaviors, there is likewise no one-size-fits-all exemplification of collective character traits. Nonetheless, we do wish to suggest some broad patterns we think will characterize the inclusive church, and we will give some examples of specific acts that, in the right context, might conform to these patterns.

As we have stressed above, inclusiveness is in part a matter of a church's orientation toward achieving collective understanding of its members' distinctive identities, including their distinctive gifts. Such understanding does not come automatically. We do not know what makes each of us unique via intuition. We must learn about this using investigative empirical methods. Thus, we propose that churches that take inclusiveness seriously will tend to adopt some method or methods for learning about their congregants—methods aimed especially at identifying congregants' distinctive identities and gifts. One example of such a method that has become popular in many contemporary Evangelical churches in the United States is a spiritual gifts assessment—a self-assessment that helps congregants to identify their spiritual gifts in a way reminiscent of personality assessment tools. However, as we've said, which specific methods are used may appropriately vary across churches. Indeed, this particular method, if used exclusively, might fail to adequately identify the potentialities of certain congregants, such as the severely mentally handicapped, whom contemporary theologians have argued can contribute to the church's mission in a vital way, albeit perhaps not via the kinds of "gifts" typically included in such surveys (e.g., Brock 2011). Our primary point here is simply that a church that does not clearly employ some empirical method aimed at learning about its congregants is unlikely to be very inclusive. Churches that exclusively use methods that

enable discovery only of features of *some* but not all of their members are likewise falling short of a reasonable bar for inclusiveness.

A second important feature of inclusiveness is the church's tendency to empower and encourage congregants to partner in the application of their unique identities to the collective pursuit of mission. Encouragement can come in many forms. Given the documented potential of narratives to transform self-understanding (e.g., Brown and Strawn 2012, 82–84), we propose that inclusive congregations will incorporate as part of their communal narratives descriptions focused on individual gifting and cooperative pursuit of mission, stressing the importance of participation on the part of all congregants. Again, there are various ways for such narratives to be communicated, which may vary from one congregation to another—for example, collective readings, songs, official identity statements, and so on. Empowerment is a matter of enabling congregants whose potentialities for mission have been discovered to form appropriate partnerships and to effectively employ their gifts in contributing to collective mission. This will include creating and communicating opportunities for the use and further development of specific gifts, and will require fostering networks of information exchange. The specifics of the relevant opportunities and communicative networks may appropriately vary across churches, but churches where opportunities are overlooked or are not communicated efficiently are unlikely to be very inclusive.

Hopefully the foregoing offers at least a useful first approximation of what we have in mind when we speak of “collective inclusiveness,” and provides some reason for thinking that such a trait is appropriately viewed as a virtue of churches—indeed, a distinctively collective virtue, insofar as it is not the sort of trait to be possessed by individuals. We conclude this section by turning to the topic of the empirical study of this trait. The idea that such empirical study can be performed and can yield significant insights receives some indirect confirmation from recent work in organizational psychology. To cite one important example, research on approaches to employee development has provided dramatic confirmation of the value of leveraging employee strengths. Organizations that attempt to leverage employee strengths focus on identifying and growing the strengths of their employees, and then enabling their employees to use these strengths in pursuit of organizational goals. Such an approach differs from approaches that focus on helping employees identify and improve upon their weaknesses.

Research on leveraging strengths has revealed that “strengths-based employee development leads to higher levels of engagement and performance within business units” (Asplund and Blacksmith 2011, 353). The notion of “strengths” as employed in this context consists of skills, knowledge, and talents. Researchers have found that part of what the world's best companies do that sets them apart is precisely that they leverage the power of their human capital (Fleming and Asplund 2007).

Strengths-based employee development has been linked to lower turnover rates, greater productivity in work units and individual employees, and increased profitability (Asplund et al. 2009).

Now, obviously, studying the impact of how businesses approach employee development is not exactly the same as studying the impact of how churches approach integrating their members into collective mission. Strengths are not the same as gifts or potentialities for mission, and the aims of a business organization are not the same as a church's distinctive function within the *missio Dei*. Nonetheless, the fruitfulness of studying the former topic is suggestive of the potential fruitfulness of studying the latter. After all, a church's concern to understand the distinctive identities of its members does *overlap* with a business's concern to identify its employees' strengths, and the differences between businesses and churches only serve to underscore the need for applying empirical methods to the specific contexts and concerns of local congregations. In light of both the hopefulness provided by empirical study of strength leveraging as well as the clear differences between this study and the empirical study of congregational inclusiveness, we propose that empirical study of collective inclusiveness in churches is highly desirable. This study may help us better understand the relationships between congregational inclusiveness and various aspects of the well-being of congregants and members of the wider community in which a church is embedded.

Collective Reconciliation

We turn now to a second candidate for a collective virtue of churches—what we will call “collective reconciliation.” We see collective reconciliation as one instance of the more general category of traits of churches that promote flourishing interpersonal relationships between their members. The basic argument for taking collective reconciliation to be a collective virtue of churches is that it promotes such flourishing, and that the promotion of such flourishing is a distinctive function the church is supposed to fulfill.

The idea that it is a distinctive function of churches to promote flourishing interpersonal relationships—indeed, reconciled relationships—between their members is well attested by contemporary theologians. Anthony Akinwale, for example, writes that “the sacrament of reconciliation is what the church is and what the church offers” (2015, 553). As instrumental agent of reconciliation, the church plays a central role in restoring harmony where there has been a fourfold alienation: alienation between the human being and God, alienation within the human family, alienation within the human being, and alienation between the human being and the whole of creation. It is particularly the idea of the church as serving the function of restoring harmony where there is alienation *within the human family* that is our focus here. Much like Akinwale, Brown and Strawn

identify as the most basic purpose of church “the formation of a community of persons that is characterized by the reign of God” (2012, 108). They further explicate this idea by writing that “the goal of this kind of congregation is a life characterized by reciprocal hospitality and love that shapes the lives of its members and functions actively in the surrounding community as a representation of, and a message about, the presence and activity of God” (108). On such an approach, the church’s fulfilling the function of fostering reconciled relationships among congregants enables it to fulfill a higher goal of reflecting the harmonious relationships within the Triune God.

We propose that collective reconciliation will promote flourishing interpersonal relationships necessary for the kind of community identified by Akinwale and Brown and Strawn. In particular, it will help congregants to overcome their alienation from one another. As such, its possession will enable churches to fulfill one of their distinctive functions, making them better specimens of their kind.

Understanding the trait of collective reconciliation requires understanding the process of reconciliation. The process of reconciliation requires, at least, apology and repentance on the part of wrongdoers and forgiveness on the part of those who have been wronged (cf. McNaughton and Gerrard 2014). Only when both sides have done their part will reconciliation be achieved, though of course there may be more to the process than this.

Thinking of the process of reconciliation as requiring these components can help us to understand the nature of the trait of collective reconciliation. The trait ultimately amounts to the community’s tendency to encourage reconciled relationships between congregants. This encouragement may incorporate many patterns of activity, including the community’s highlighting for all congregants appropriate reasons for both apology and repentance on the one hand and forgiveness on the other, its modeling reconciliation for congregants, flagging opportunities for reconciliation, and idealizing reconciliation itself. As with the trait of inclusiveness, these patterns may be realized through a wide range of different specific acts. What is clear, however, is that a church that does not idealize reconciliation, that does not flag opportunities for it, does not highlight reasons for apology, repentance, and forgiveness, and does not model reconciliation is unlikely to fulfill well the church’s function of promoting those flourishing relationships between its members essential to reflecting the Triune God.

To be a bit more concrete, some theologians have recently stressed certain central church practices that can exemplify the patterns characteristic of collective reconciliation. Chief among these practices is the Eucharist. Certainly the Eucharist can be practiced in such a way that it flags opportunities for reconciliation, idealizes reconciliation, highlights reasons for apology, repentance, and forgiveness, and models reconciliation for congregants. From the earliest days of the Church, celebration of the

Eucharist was a time when opportunities for reconciliation were flagged, and indeed reconciliation was treated as a prerequisite for participating in the Eucharist (Cavanaugh 1998, 238). Certainly also the Eucharist can be practiced in such a way as to idealize reconciliation. After all, the whole purpose of what is symbolized in the Eucharist—Christ’s suffering and death—was to offer reconciliation between humanity and God. As John Berkman puts it, “As disciples of a savior who comes to save us from our sins and is crucified for our sins, Christians cannot but be clear about our status as sinners deserving God’s retributive justice *and* reconciled by God’s merciful initiative in Christ” (2011, 98). Of course, our consciousness of our sinfulness brings to mind reasons for repentance and apology. And, likewise, our consciousness of our sinfulness, together with the very corporate nature of Eucharistic practice, makes clear to us our equality with all other congregants before God. Consciousness of such equality, as Robert Roberts (1995) has highlighted in his philosophical work on forgivingness, is one of the chief reasons for offering forgiveness. And, finally, Christ’s initiative that we remember in the Eucharist, together with the imbibing of the elements which marks an acceptance of this initiative, provides us with a salient model of reconciliation. Brown and Strawn write, “we take the elements together as the church—it is a communal act, with all the power of reciprocal imitation that contributes to the formation and integration of the congregation into a genuine body” (2012, 151).

This is not to say that every congregation should practice the Eucharist in exactly the same way. Nor is it to suggest that the practice of the Eucharist is alone sufficient for a congregation to exhibit the virtue of collective reconciliation. After all, as Berkman writes, “The life of the Church and of Christian disciples is none other than a life of reconciliation” (2011, 99). Encouragement to reconciliation ought to be part of the fabric of the congregation’s life together. The example of the Eucharist is offered as just one concrete way in which a community’s concern to encourage reconciled relationships may take shape. The varied ways in which it can be practiced highlight for us that, more generally, some congregations can be more strongly oriented toward encouraging reconciliation than others, and this will affect how even central church practices are carried out. As Jennifer Herdt warns, we cannot succumb to “thinking that our actual practices always already instantiate the ideal. . . . Our worship of God is sometimes perverted in ways that make it difficult to receive the gifts that God gives and to pass them on to others” (2011, 543).

These observations about differences across congregations in their practice of Eucharist lead us directly to the topic of the empirical study of collective reconciliation. This study would begin with the development of measurement tools to help researchers identify congregations that are more strongly characterized by collective reconciliation and congregations that are less strongly characterized by it. Using these tools, researchers could

then study how collective reconciliation is related to various aspects of the well-being of congregants, the health of the church, and the wider life of the community in which the congregation is embedded. Interventions aimed at cultivating collective reconciliation could also be designed and their effectiveness studied.

As with the study of collective inclusiveness, there is some reason to hope that collective reconciliation in the church can be profitably studied using empirical methods. Similar topics have been studied fruitfully already in the area of organizational psychology. A prime example here is the study of diverse approaches to conflict management within organizations. Collective reconciliation is, we might think, at least an important component of a relatively distinctive approach to managing conflict—specifically, within the church. Research on conflict management in organizations has revealed that there are different approaches that organizations take to managing conflict, and that these different approaches have unique benefits and drawbacks. For example, John Budd and Alexander Colvin (2014) distinguish four broad approaches to conflict management within businesses on the basis of how these approaches attempt to balance three distinct goals of managing conflict: efficiency, equity, and voice. Budd and Colvin argue that the approaches balance these goals in different ways in part because of their differing assumptions about the nature of the employment relationship and the origins of conflict. They identify examples of institutions that exemplify each of these approaches, and pave a way toward studying these different collective orientations toward conflict.

Of course, managing conflict within a business is not the same as fostering reconciliation in a church community. For example, if the way we have described collective reconciliation above is correct, then churches ought to add at least one further goal to the three identified by Budd and Colvin—namely, achieving reconciled relationship itself. In fact, we would suggest that the church's approach to conflict is really quite distinct from any of the approaches highlighted by Budd and Colvin. The approaches Budd and Colvin survey are all in a way reactive—they only kick in once conflict has reached a sufficiently acute level. By contrast, a church that strongly exemplifies collective reconciliation may more proactively seek out conflict—not in the sense of seeking to incite it, but in the sense of seeking to uncover it. This way, those party to it can become reconciled. In our view, these differences present an interesting opportunity for scholarship. Studying collective reconciliation in the church may not only prove insightful for church communities; it may provide unique insights for managing conflict in businesses as well. Existing research on conflict management in businesses, while not concerned precisely with collective reconciliation, nonetheless provides hope that such research can be accomplished, and it even suggests that such research may be of interest outside of the church community.

CONCLUSION

Our primary purpose in this article has been to advocate for the interdisciplinary study of the collective character traits of religious congregations, taking local Christian churches as our focal example. We proposed that this interdisciplinary study would mirror the now flourishing interdisciplinary study of the character traits of individual persons. On behalf of this study, we have urged that there is an emerging intersection of interest from several distinct academic disciplines that makes the present time particularly ripe for this kind of effort. And we have sought to advance the effort by examining two candidate virtues of churches—collective inclusiveness and collective reconciliation.

We hope it is clear that through these efforts we are only taking the first steps of a potentially large and complex project. There are many challenges facing such a project—some of a conceptual nature and some of a practical nature. On the conceptual side, some readers may wonder whether it is not better to simply study collective religious *practices* rather than collective religious *traits*. The former, it might be argued, are far more easily identified and studied. On the practical side, there is of course the difficulty of finding religious institutions both willing and capable of participating in the necessary studies.

We won't offer a long-winded response to these concerns here. Rather, we simply observe that parallel challenges have been raised and resisted when it comes to the interdisciplinary study of the character traits of individual persons. It is a much simpler matter to study the acts of individuals than their characters, and there are always difficulties of attracting willing and qualified participants for studies. Nonetheless, the study of individual character continues. We hope challenges like the foregoing won't prevent the interdisciplinary study of the collective characters of religious institutions from starting.

The next steps in this study will involve recruiting researchers from multiple academic disciplines into partnerships, identifying and clarifying the nature of specific traits to be studied, developing scales for measuring collective character traits empirically, and recruiting test subjects. Toward this, end we hope readers will join us, and will also form their own research teams.

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NOTES

1. Following the approach of congregational studies mentioned in the previous section, we take the local congregation to be the basic unit of study, but we also recognize that the interdisciplinary study we are advocating may have application to broader church bodies, such as synods or diocese; cf. here Haight and Nieman (2009).
2. We note at the outset that our use of the language of “inclusiveness” is stipulative, and that we do not intend to follow precisely other established uses of the language of “inclusiveness” in political or theological discourses, though there is some overlap between our usage and established political usage as will become apparent below.
3. On the history of the idea that the Church, and not just the members of the Trinity, has a role within the *missio Dei*, see Bosch (2011, 398–402).

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