

# Neither cross nor catalyst: Institutions as a container for crisis

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The interlocking crises of a pandemic, political unrest, and racial injustice invite renewed attention to the role of institutions in times of crisis. To this end, this chapter engages with Mary Douglas's and Hugh Hecló's work on institutions to introduce two metaphors for institutions' role in times of crisis: cross and catalyst. When employed to study religious organizations during crisis, however, a third option complements the antinomy Douglas and Hecló present: institutions as a container for the collaboration crisis requires. As practical theology considers the evolution of institutions amid ongoing crisis, this third metaphor can guide research and praxis.

Part one engages Mary Douglas's and Hugh Hecló's work on institutions to consider two dominant metaphors for the role of institutions in times of crisis: cross and catalyst. As Douglas notes in *How Institutions Think*, institutions structure individuals' imaginative horizons, representing a form of social thinking writ large, especially in times of crisis. To constructively extend Douglas's account, institutions are a cross to bear, providing the social scripts that direct individual and collective responses to crisis. Further, as Hecló notes in *On Thinking Institutionally*, institutions are often created in response to crisis and regulate change amid crisis. Hecló accents the agency individuals retain to build institutions, even amid life and death decisions. To extend Hecló's logic, institutions are a catalyst for change.

Part two introduces original empirical research completed during the COVID-19 crisis to consider how existing frameworks can inform the study of religious institutions during times of crisis. This research identifies a third metaphor that complements this antinomy Douglas and Hecló represent: institutions provide a container for the collaboration crisis requires. When examined as a container for collaborative activity, institutions become sites of inquiry that invite interdisciplinary perspectives. Four features evince how institutions function as a container in crisis: connection, care, change, and collaboration.

Finally, the conclusion identifies three implications for research in practical theology in the wake of crisis. First, crisis requires an interdisciplinary approach in order to adequately consider and constructively engage how crisis impacts individuals and communities. Second, crisis provides a category that invites empirical and normative inquiry. Third, if institutions represent a container to navigate crisis, there is an ongoing need for contextual and constructive research about the form of institutionality that can sustain faith communities in the wake of this crisis.

## Introduction

The interlocking crises of a pandemic, political unrest, and racial injustice invite renewed attention to the role of institutions in times of crisis. Practical

theology has a history of prioritizing the challenges that confront communities of faith (Miller-McLemore 2012)—including the specific challenges before religious institutions—but the field has underexplored the role of institutions with(in) crisis. For ex-





ample, Scharen and Campbell-Reed conclude their report “Learning Pastoral Imagination” by identifying the challenge before pastors, theological educators, and local communities of faith: “[W]e are by all accounts living through a time of dramatic shifts in religious life generally and in the institutions responsible for training leaders for communities of faith” (2016, p. 46). According to Scharen and Campbell-Reed, the challenge is acute, but the way forward is not clear.

Crisis is an experience that “brings one up short” (Osmer 2008, p. 21). Recent reflections expand this analysis, demonstrating the relevance of ongoing inquiry at this intersection. For example: Benac and Weber-Johnson’s edited collection, *Crisis and Care* (2021), introduces two metaphors: a famine and flood to describe how crisis impacts faith communities. Like a famine, crisis can slowly grow, eventually eroding a community’s reserves and resilience. Like a flood, crisis can also come suddenly, sweeping individuals and communities away in a deluge of despair (pp. 2–5). Sabrina Müller observes in *Lived Theology* (2021) how the “phenomena of crisis” (p. 5) posed by declining congregations invites a reassessment of the common priesthood that guides Protestant communions. Kiara Jorgensen and Alan Padgett’s *Ecotheology* (2020) identifies the mounting climate crisis as a site that demands theological reflection and collective action. Thomas Long’s *What Shall We Say?* (2014) details the complex relationship between the preaching vocation and the crisis of faith. And Jean Proeschold-Bel and Jayson Byassee review recent empirical data to detail the severity of a mounting clergy health crisis in North America in *Faithful and Fractured* (2018). These and other recent reflections on crisis decry a single narrative (Werntz 2021); however, they illustrate how the complex crises that confront communities of faith interact with a shifting institutional landscape. Nevertheless, the precise relationship between institutions and crisis in this moment invites renewed reflection and clarification. In this absence, there is, as Dykstra and Hudnut-Beumler note (1992) the need for “an alternative metaphor” (p. 330) to guide religious life.

To address this need, this essay undertakes an interdisciplinary investigation to explore three metaphors for the role of institutions in times of crisis.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Research on institutions identifies a plurality of definitions for “institutions.” This plurality, as Scott (2014) and

Part one engages with Mary Douglas’s and Hugh Heclo’s work on institutions to consider two dominant metaphors for the role of institutions in times of crisis: cross and catalyst. Part two introduces original empirical research completed during the COVID-19 crisis to consider how existing frameworks can inform the study of religious institutions during times of crisis. This research identifies a third metaphor that complements this antinomy Douglas and Heclo represent: institutions provide a container for the collaboration crisis requires. While existing metaphors for the role of institutions in crises express the capacity for institutions to constrain and catalyze individuals’ response to crisis, the third metaphor, institutions as container, clarifies how institutions direct the collective experience and constructive responses. Finally, the conclusion identifies three implications for research in practical theology in the wake of crisis.<sup>2</sup>

## Existing Metaphors: Cross and Catalyst

Existing metaphors for the role of institutions accent either institutions’ capacity to restrict human agency or their capacity to catalyze collective action. The metaphors of “cross” and “catalyst” express these dominant metaphors. Research from Mary Douglas and Hugh Heclo provide two representative accounts of these views.

## Mary Douglas: Institutions as Cross

Mary Douglas’s Abrams Lectures, as collected in *How Institutions Think* (1986), clarify “the extent to which thinking depends on institutions” (p. 8). As she concludes: “For better or worse, individuals really do share their thoughts and they do to some

Heclo (2008) note, can introduce conceptual ambiguity. For the purpose of this chapter, “institutions” is defined as organized, patterned processes of social engagement that offer dynamic, ordered ways of living according to a vision for individual and collective flourishing.

<sup>2</sup> I presented versions of this argument at three international conferences in 2021: The International Academy of Practical Theology (IAPT), the International Society for the Sociology of Religion (ISSR), and the British & Irish Association for Practical Theology (BIAPT). Conversations with Steve Taylor shaped this work, and Savannah Green provided research support. In each case, I am grateful for colleagues’ thoughtful engagement.



extent harmonize their preferences, and they have no other way to make big decisions except within the scope of the institutions they build” (p. 128). For Douglas, however, crisis clarifies the formative function of institutions. She introduces this with the Speluncean Explorer example of five members of a society who become trapped underground while spelunking. When help cannot reach them and their supplies run out, they determine the only way they can survive is if they eat the flesh of one of their party and emerge many days later as a party of four. When they are tried, the judges arrive at three different conclusions according to the institutional frameworks that direct their thinking: conviction for murder, acquittal, and withholding decision.

This example introduces institutions’ spacious social influence that represents a form of social thinking writ large, especially in times of crisis. As Douglas writes: “[I]ndividuals in crisis do not make life and death decisions on their own. Who shall be saved and who shall die is settled by institutions” (p. 4). Although individuals may conveniently ignore the way institutions direct decision making, crisis crystallizes institutions’ spacious influence. A pandemic. Economic fragility. Racial injustice. Political Unrest. These are the recent caverns we have fallen into, and the competing responses demonstrate institutions’ enduring ability to direct responses. Amidst the modern and post-modern prioritization of autonomy and rationality, Douglas’s account makes visible the seemingly invisible influence of institutions in contemporary society. For her contemporary readers, Douglas’s comments represent a rhetorical appeal to *think* about the institutional production and extension of knowledge through institutions and the type of institutions that constitute the imaginative boundaries in contemporary society.

Although Douglas does not use the metaphor of a “cross” to describe her understanding of how institutions think, it provides a fitting category to describe the two-fold function of institutions within her account. On the one hand, institutions are a cross to bear; they express the social scripts individuals inherit, directing their individual and collective action. Unlike the trapped miners, contemporary readers are not able to free themselves from the cross of institutions. As Douglas notes: “Only the individualists, bound not by ties to one another and imbued by no principals of solidarity, would hit upon the cannable gamble as the proper course” (p. 8). On the other hand, institutions are also a cross

for crucifixion, providing justification for the execution of violence upon the individuals institutions deem “guilty” of crimes against the broader society institutions support. While Douglas acknowledges the moral impasse this conclusion represents, she does not provide a convenient exit from institutions. Individuals can only proceed by “recognizing the individual person’s involvement within institution-building from the very start” (p. 67). Hence, amid the “life and death decisions” (p. 4) institutions govern, individuals can navigate crisis with an awareness of how institutions may be a cross to bear or an instrument for execution.

### Hugh Hecló: Institutions as Catalyst

Hugh Hecló’s argument in *On Thinking Institutionally* (2008) provides a second metaphor: institutions as catalyst. If Douglas accents individuals constrained ability to think apart from institutions, Hecló prioritizes the individual’s ability to think within the institutions they inhabit. This form of thinking requires considering the ways individuals may think within institutions, stewarding the institutional spaces that mediate meaning. For Hecló, thinking institutionally involves moving beyond thinking *about* institutions to thinking as agents *within* institutional frameworks that are infused with meaning and values. Such a way of thinking involves seeing institutions from the “inside out” (p. 82) and engaging in the practice of “faithful reception” in which one receives meaning from external referents in the past while also attending to the tradition one is creating (p. 98). Similarly locating the inception of institutions in relation to crisis, Hecló offers a more optimistic account of individual moral agency beyond crisis. Institutions, as Hecló notes, are “often created in response to some crisis [and] preserve stability by adapting to changing circumstances of their social setting” (p. 54). Crisis catalyzes institutions.

While crisis may catalyze the formation of institutions, individuals retain the ability to act as moral agents in the wake of crisis. Specifically, they have the power to determine which values and practices will be preserved beyond times of crisis. Adding an affective dimension to the reception and transmission of values through institutions, Hecló compares thinking institutionally to “receiving and passing on a kiss through a veil” (p. 110). This distinction by Hecló acknowledges the formative capacity of insti-



tutions while also accenting the agency that individuals possess within institutions to decide which values are worth transmitting, thereby shaping institutions through their stewardship. In this way, Hecló picks up where Douglas concludes by accenting the agency individuals retain to build institutions, even amid the challenges of life and death decisions.

To extend the logic of Hecló's account, institutions are a catalyst for collective discernment. The enduring quality of institutions and their ability to transcend space and geography allows individuals to exert moral agency by shaping the scripts that future generations will receive. In doing so, they become catalysts for collective discernment and generational change. To receive the invitation to think institutionally is to become a steward of the institution one inhabits; it is to undertake a practice of faithful reception and transmission between the generations an institution spans. Without minimizing the way institutions can function as a cross, Hecló's attention to the transmission of values allows him to accent the catalytic promise of thinking institutionally. As Hecló notes, "As a basic orientation toward life, institutional thinking understands itself to be in a position primarily of receiving rather than of inventing or creating" (p. 98). This form of "faithful reception," as Hecló notes, "gives life meaning by establishing a connection with exterior referents in the past" (98). To think institutionally is to become an actor in the catalytic transmission of values and practices through institutions.

### A Third Metaphor: Institutions as Container

While Douglas's and Hecló's work helpfully accents how institutions constrain and enable activity during crisis, another metaphor is needed. The metaphor of a container provides an apt image to describe the dual function of institutions. I will develop this metaphor by describing original empirical research completed over the last four years, with specific attention to data collected during the pandemic.

This research examined ecclesial-organizational adaptation in the Pacific Northwest, a region of the United States that includes Oregon, Idaho, and Washington. The region is distinguished by a history of religious entrepreneurship and a marginal social position for religious organizations. According to

Mark Silk, a scholar of American religion, the region provides a case to consider "the American religious future" (Silk 2019).

Two critical cases where individuals across different types of organizations are engaged in collaborative responses to the challenges they face organized this research. In times of crisis, this research across the Pacific Northwest identified these two sites as hubs that provide a container for the uncertainty crisis brings. Neither a megachurch nor a denomination, a hub is a densely networked organizational form that anchors religious life within a particular community and facilitates webs of connection across a broader ecclesial ecology. Three different forms of crisis impacted these hubs: 1) the crisis of a shifting ecclesial landscape; 2) the crisis of a marginal social position; 3) the crisis of a pandemic. When combined, people of faith and religious institutions in the region both have prolonged and acute exposure to uncertainty.<sup>3</sup>

The findings presented here reflect a series of follow-up interviews and a focus group completed in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic with a subsample of participants across these two hubs. These interviews and focus group occurred between December 14, 2020 and April 1, 2021. Nine individuals participated in the follow-up interviews, and fourteen individuals attended a focus group. Interview and focus group audio were transcribed and coded using a deductive and inductive coding strategy. This small-N design provides a basis for further theory building about the relationship between institutions in times of crisis. Table two provides an overview of the demographic information for interview participants in this phase of research.

The crisis named in this moment had been building for some time. As one organizer noted prior to the pandemic, pastors and people of faith throughout the region recognized the fragility of existing structures. "They know the current models aren't working. I'm talking about non-denoms, denominational, Presbyterian, even the big, big churches, both Presbyterian and non-denom. They're swimming really hard just to stay even. Everybody recognizes that there are challenges, that we don't control these factors." When focus group participants gathered, they noted the gravity of crisis and the reality of hope: "[The church] has made it through every moment of crisis and challenge and attempts by cul-

3 For a full description of these two cases, see Benac (2022).



Figure 1: Research participant overview

Participant	Denominational affiliation	Gender
1. Interview Participant 1	Reformed	Male
2. Interview Participant 2	Reformed	Did not identify
3. Interview Participant 3	Wesleyan	Male
4. Interview Participant 4	Vineyard	Female
5. Interview Participant 5	Reformed	Male
6. Interview Participant 6	Non-denominational	Male
7. Interview Participant 7	Reformed	Male
8. Interview Participant 8	Non-denominational	Female
9. Interview Participant 9	Reformed	Male
10. Focus group participant 1	N/A	Male
11. Focus group participant 2	N/A	Male
12. Focus group participant 3	N/A	Male
13. Focus group participant 4	Reformed	Male
14. Focus group participant 5	Reformed	Female
15. Focus group participant 6	Reformed	Male
16. Focus group participant 7	Wesleyan	Female
17. Focus group participant 8	N/A	Male
18. Focus group participant 9	Wesleyan	Female
19. Focus group participant 10	N/A	Male
20. Focus group participant 11	N/A	Male
21. Focus group participant 12	Wesleyan	Male
22. Focus group participant 13	N/A	Male
23. Focus group participant 14	Reformed	Male

tures to distort the gospel. And so, what we're trying to do in a variety of different ways ... is to help people think not about the binaries that have been given by the culture." As expressed by individuals interviewed for this research, religious leaders were able to think beyond existing institutional templates during this time of crisis. Amid the characteristic uncertainty of religious life in the region, they no longer had to think *according to* or *within* the institutional structures they inhabited; instead, they had an opportunity to think *beyond* them. Four features evince how institutions function as a container in crisis: connection, care, change, and collaboration.

## Connection

Individuals identified how their connections to individuals in times of crisis created the relational conditions to sustain their work. These connections, in turn, created a space for them to innovate in ways that extend connection to the people they serve. As one neighborhood-based pastor noted, "We just felt really fortunate to be positioned as we are, already deeply embedded in the neighborhood. It's just allowed us ... Well, it's just been our safety net, and our people that's already very established here. So, we shifted in some ways, we went to zoom meetings



pretty quickly, but we've been noticing how other people are waking up to the gifts in the neighborhood, the gifts of neighboring." The connections named throughout these interviews were specific, frequently rooted in a local geography, and marked by trust that emerged from a history of previous relationship. Although some individuals identified how denominations, health care providers, and large congregations provided a degree of stability, crisis catalyzed a more local practice of connection in their particular religious environment. As one participant shared: "So I think just the adversity has renewed some of the need to be connected together."

When many existing religious institutions had to shutter their doors or migrate online, existing connections and collaborations became the connective tissue that provided a container for leaders' responses. While individuals acknowledged the value of the broader organization, in these times of crisis, they more readily named individuals as the source of relational support. Connection created the relational container for resilience amid crisis.

## Care

Institutions provided a container for care amid the crisis of precarity in this moment. For example, a pastor at a megachurch in Seattle observed how their work early in the pandemic pivoted to extend care to those in their congregation as well as in the broader community. Although COVID-19 introduced numerous changes for their congregation, care remained the primary axis for work and ministry. He notes, "Since we last talked, quite a bit has changed with the event of COVID when that hit in March. We shifted quite a bit in terms of dialing down on some of the things I was doing and really ramping up some of the other things... Still, just being aware of how do we still care and sense needs as they are arising and just be on the lookout for folks." This priority led them to extend hospitality and shower facilities to many in the homeless facility who were not only displaced but now without a place to shower amid stay-at-home orders and the closure of gym facilities. While he acknowledges mixed responses from people in the congregation, they prioritized care throughout their response. Several others noted the expanded needs for care in the communities they serve. For example, these religious leaders frequently extended care to address the precarity of isolation, the inability to gather in

person as a worshipping community, the expanding public health needs, and the impact of the pandemic on elderly and other vulnerable communities. As one leader observed, he thinks care is the "glue" that holds their community together: "There's a learning curve that has happened where they had enjoyed just a lot more personal care, but we're hoping that's kind of going to be the glue that keeps us—that has kept us together during this crisis—but will keep us together afterwards. We'll see." Although his concluding comments, "We'll see," express the ongoing uncertainty so many religious leaders face about the future, care remains a primary feature of institutions' role in time of crisis.

Care requires meaningful connection in order to have the intended effect on the community these leaders serve. As one leader reflected on his history of service in his community, he observed how meaningful connections only emerge in conditions marked by an abundance of care.

Most of what I've seen from my congregation and I've been passionate about for 15 years is [meaningful connection] rooted in a real care for the concerns of the people and for the contextual concern. What matters in this context, when you really understand, not in a general sense, but in a specific sense, what we endure day in and day out. And, so connections actually happen when people feel like there is a genuine concern for their well-being holistically from those who say that, whether that's an institution or individual who says that they want to, for the connection to last or to be durable.

Noting how care crosses creates the container for institutions *and* individuals to pursue their work, this particular pastor expressed the priority of care, in times of crisis as well as beyond the crisis of this moment. When sustained by existing relational connections and knowledge of the needs of their communities, leaders extended care to those in their congregation and their broader community.

## Change

Institutions create a container to sustain the change crisis requires. While the leaders engaged in this study are mindful of the way their communities are always evolving, they also note how crises catalyzed a greater level of creativity. For example, a Presbyterian pastor spoke about the surge in creativity amid the pandemic. "Well, creativity is just normal right now.... [Our church and other local congregations



share a] practice of experimenting and developing a language and capacity as a congregation for trying new experiments and learning from them.” Noting how this was a learned practice they acquired through exercise, he observes how broader institutional partnerships created the container to acquire and practice this skill. Without dismissing the severity of the crisis, the leader also wonders whether their perceived stability is a byproduct of a long history of presence in this particular community. “I just wonder if part of what we’re benefiting from is the long tradition and the deep roots that the church has.” For some leaders and communities, change involved experimenting with a new form of worship (frequently online), others adapted to extend their ministries beyond the church walls, others regard this time as a confirmation for their longstanding vision to reimagine church, and still other ministry leaders transitioned into new roles—both within and beyond congregational ministry—during crisis.

Crisis introduces unavoidable change for those commissioned to care for a community and steward institutions. As one leader noted, this particular crisis introduces a “a bit of a shuffle” in the way they organize and pursue their common life. Nevertheless, amid the precarity of crisis, institutions marked by connection and care create the conditions for creative and nimble responses. Leaders serving in contexts marked by connection and care were able to imagine and pursue the changes that enriched their common life, rather than simply reacting in an attempt to reclaim equilibrium and certainty.

## Collaboration

Finally, institutions provide a container for collaboration amid crisis. When I first met this First Free Methodist pastor in 2019, he was upbeat and enthusiastic about the trajectory of their work and ministry. “I think we’re going in the right direction, which is encouraging, very encouraging,” he offered at the end of our conversation. “And I don’t anticipate being the same church 10 years from now. I hope that 10 years from now, not that we’re not standing, sitting, passing the plate, but that we’re doing that in whatever context.” When we connected two years later, in February 2021, he was upbeat and profoundly grateful for his community, but also weary. “It’s been a long year with this,” he shared early in our conversation. For this pastor and so many others, they carry the challenges of the last year like a

weight upon the soul, bearing silent testimony to the visible and invisible changes in their communities. I then asked him about any changes to the challenges he faced since we talked. With marked enthusiasm, he responded, “The only one that’s a lot less of a challenge right now is partnership.”

This theme was repeated throughout this work: in times of crisis, existing connection to and through institutions create a container for collaboration. Notably, collaboration creates the container for the other three to emerge and is enlivened in institutional contexts marked by connection, care, and creativity. Like the movement of a helix, these four features hang together in a virtuous pattern of relation. While crisis disrupts the status quo in institutions, bringing us “up short” (Osmer 2008, p. 21), institutions also create a container to navigate crisis when they are marked by connection, care, a willingness to change, and collaboration.

## After Crisis: Implications for Practical Theology

While the particular crises that catalyzed these and similar reflections will abate, there remains an ongoing need for scholarly attention to how crisis impacts faith communities and the attendant practice(s) of religious leadership, both amid and beyond times of crisis. To this end, I’ll conclude with the three constructive proposals for practical theology that explore the relationship between crisis, institutions, and moral formation.

First, crisis requires an interdisciplinary approach in order to adequately consider and constructively engage how crisis impacts individuals and communities. Just as the cascading crises of this moment are not restricted to a single individual or community, crisis scholarship requires an approach that intentionally crosses sectors and disciplinary silos. If crisis disrupts the very structure or belonging that ground a common life, research must similarly bleed through disciplinary barriers in order to promote connection, care, collaboration, and change. As an intrinsically interdisciplinary field (Miller-McLemore 2012; Osmer 2008; Swinton and Mowat 2016; Ward 2017), practical theology is well situated among the theological disciplines to lead and convene scholarly conversations about contemporary and future crises. Future research may engage in cross-pollinating work with researchers in crisis communications, ethics, political science, or



ganizational studies, and philanthropy, among others.

Second, crisis provides a category that invites empirical and normative inquiry. Unshakeable encounters with crisis introduce questions and conundrums that require more than thick description. Indeed, as Douglas notes, Crisis forces those in its grips to make “life and death decisions,” (1986, p. 4). To return to the image of the Speluncean Explorer example Douglas employs, individuals in the dark cavern of crisis must determine the way of life that will guide their response. Those beyond the cavern, however, face the crisis of determining which responses will pattern practice for those who follow. The cataclysmic disruptions crises bring resist neat division between objective observation and constructive proposals. Accordingly, empirical research that stops short of normative reflection understates the gravity of crisis; and normative reflection that is not grounded in empirical analysis risks overreaching. Ongoing practical theological reflection can combine empirical and normative reflection on crisis by prioritizing ongoing research about “the way of life” that sustains communities of practice (Miller-McLemore 2012).

Finally, if institutions represent a container to navigate crisis, there is an ongoing need for contextual and constructive research about the form of institutionality that can sustain faith communities in the wake of this crisis. Although practical theology has historically noted the need to study the shifting institutional landscape that surrounds religious life—as Scharen and Campbell-Reed observe—the field has yet to identify “institutions” as a sub-field that merits its own attention. There remains, as Dykstra (1991) notes, a need to consider how the building and care of institutions may itself represent a form of “Christian practice” (p. 57). If institutions provided a container for crisis, the making and sustaining of institutions to this end requires a constellation of Christian practice that support the life of faith.<sup>4</sup> Accordingly, future research may extend the three metaphors introduced here—cross, catalyst, and container—by considering the kinds of institu-

tions and the supporting conditions that sustain the life of faith, within and beyond times of crisis.

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4 It is beyond the scope of this argument to review debates in practical theology about the dually formative a deformative capacity of Christian practice. For an account that accents practices’ formative function, see Dykstra (1991). For an account that notes practices’ deformative potential, or “characteristic damage,” see Winner (2018).