First, a story of a relationship…

The Reverend Albert T. Mollegen was a professor of New Testament, Christian Ethics, and Apologetics at the Virginia Theological Seminary (VTS) from 1936-1974. “Molle,” as he was known affectionately by his students, was a challenging teacher and caring counselor to generations of clergy. His chief aim was to help his students, “make sense out of existence.”[1] He also was an ardent and able practitioner of making theology accessible to the laity, lecturing far and wide to the masses and, in the early 1970's, helping to establish a Lay School of Theology at VTS. He also was a political activist and a proponent of racial integration in an era when such a position not only was not de rigueur, but also downright dangerous to hold. Mollegen. Theologian and Teacher. Priest and Pastor.

Mollegen struggled with faith and doubt. A struggle that shaped his lifelong intellectual and spiritual pilgrimage. Growing up in the South in an era in which the battle between science and religion was at its height, culminating in the Scopes trial,[2] Mollegen chose science over his Christian fundamentalist background. During his college years at Mississippi State University, he dropped out of the church, describing himself, in terms of the F. Scott Fitzgerald generation, as, “bankrupt of any meaning of life at all.”

Why do I share this story about Albert Mollegen?

In the spring following his graduation from college, Mollegen met the Reverend Dr. Charles Frederick Penniman, Sr., who was the rector of St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Meridian, Mississippi. Penniman was known as a liberal. His home was a meeting place for the young intellectuals in and around Meridian. Mollegen was numbered among this band of bright, intense, freethinking, inveterate questioners. Mollegen became a Penniman protégé and Penniman a Mollegen mentor. This was a relationship that lasted many years.

Why do I share this story about Albert Mollegen and Charles Penniman?

By its fruit, a tree may be known. Through Mollegen we can catch a glimpse of Penniman. Theologian and Teacher. Priest and Pastor. Mollegen once wrote, perhaps referring to Penniman, “If at one time or another we came back to the Church after being non-Christians through intellectual or other difficulties, it was always some contemporary living Christian who touched us.”

This experience of relationship, the touching of one human life with another in an authentic way is at the heart of the functional education discipline of which Charles Penniman is the author and architect.

Next, defining terms…
Functional Education or "func ed," generally speaking, is a Christian education pedagogical model or instructional method authored by Charles Penniman, the aim of which is to make sense out of existence. Func ed begins with the exploration of life experience and moves to lore, the traditional teaching of the church.

At the heart of the discipline is the recognition of the tension between sin and faith. In this instance, sin has less to do with some idea of iniquity, our falling short of some standard of morality, and more to do with our falling short of an essential authenticity in our humanity, our being less than true to our selves, to others, and to God. Faith -- understood here as the opposite of sin, hence, an act of human authenticity -- is our affirmation, "(our) ‘yes’ to the power that created," us.[3]

The rationale of the discipline is rooted in the idea that a living faith cannot be had unless the depth of sin and despair are encountered. Moreover, the discipline involves three key elements: the experiential (engaging the stuff of our lives in this world), the biblical (engaging the source material of our religious tradition), and the spiritual (engaging the soul-deep inner movement and working of mind, emotion, and will). More especially, func ed is the discipline of the St. Mark's community, both the fundamental and foundational theoria of our communal praxis, i.e., the principle undergirding the practice of our way of life, our manner of being and doing community.

Paul, what are you talking about?

I have spoken often of our regrounding our func ed discipline in the 5000+ year old Judeo-Christian historical moorings and theological underpinnings in and on which Charles Penniman thought and taught. What am I getting at here? (One of my first reactions to the invitation of Mary Louise Wagner and Bruce Sherman, our incoming Christian Education Co-Directors, to share my views at this year’s Introduction to Functional Education gathering, was to say to myself, "Now I’ve got to figure out what I’ve been talking about!")

A little more history...

In 1954, the Reverend William M. Baxter was called to be St. Mark’s rector. These were trying times for St. Mark's. The church, given demographic changes in the neighborhood, diminishing communicant and, hence, financial strength, seemed ready to close. Bill Baxter, however, with a committed group within St. Mark’s, had a vision of a revitalized community with a ministry to those not previously of the fold. That vision embraced the notion that the importance of, "Christianity (could) best be understood through a personal experience of judgment and redemption within the framework of a holy community."[4] Invitations to, "Interested Pagans, Bored Christians, and Others," or, simply, “Inquirers” were circulated widely. Lectures and discussions on, "Christianity and the Intellectual," and, "Christianity and the Bored Citizen," were advertised. The congregation began to experience a mood of revitalization. In 1955, Baxter invited Penniman, then Director of the Educational Center in St. Louis, to serve as an educational consultant to St. Mark’s. The seeds of func ed were planted in fertile St. Markan soil!
In 1966, the Reverend James R. Adams succeeded Baxter as rector of St. Mark's. He continued Baxter's outreach to, "non-traditional Christians." Over the course of time the appeal was articulated as a call to skeptics or those, in the words of Jim Adams, "who instinctively doubt, question, or disagree with assertions presented without verifiable evidence." Many came. Some with memories of experiences in the institutional church in which the two prescribed reactions to the proclamation of religious dogma were wholesale acceptance and respectful silence. Some, considering themselves atheists or agnostics, hadn't, "darkened the doors," of the church for years.

I have a sense that as func ed was taught over the years, a greater focus was placed on personal experience, so to help people unearth and examine what they truly thought and felt. Indeed, the delving into the experiential is at the core of the content of func ed. However, sometimes and, then, gradually, more and more, I think that a lesser emphasis may have been placed on getting under the surface of personal experience into the realm of a deeper meaning of existence. Such a deeper meaning may be found in probing that relation between belief and behavior, that intersection of life at which issues of faith often freely arise and confront us. Truly, as the experiential is at the core of the content of func ed, it also is the context for The Categories, which, "are devices to help (one)...get under the surface of experience."[6] (I will say more about The Categories later.) It is this business of, "getting under the surface," or "of deepening the conversation (which takes us) into the realm of theology."[7] It is this theological enterprise, also of which more will be said later, that embraces the biblical and spiritual elements of func ed, which, again, I think, may have been given a lesser emphasis in the past.

Looking at today...

Now, I think, is a time to reground our func ed discipline in the theological and historical soil in which it first took root and flowered. Why?

In the words of the hymn, "new occasions teach new duties."[8] The "new occasion" of this current age calls for it. I think that many who now come to us seeking community summon us to this task. Some who come to us today, fairly conversant in the language of faith, speak freely of their quest for God or of their spiritual pilgrimage. They, generally, do not find the realms Christian theology and church history unfamiliar territory, much less unwelcome terrain. Some who come to us today have had little engagement, positive or negative, with the institutional church; hence, they express a desire to learn the lore, the traditional teaching of the church.

Further and even more importantly, I believe that our effort to reground our func ed discipline in its foundational theology and history honors the memory and legacy of its author, Charles Penniman. Clearly, Penniman knew that life (our experience in this world) and lore (the traditional teaching of the faith community) were not and are not separate but connected realities. Indeed, life is expressed in lore and lore, in its most authentic form, seeks to explain life.

A word about theology...

Theology. From the Greek, theologia, which is compounded of two words, theos, God,
and logos, word. Theology, literally, “God word,” or, “word about God.” Meaning basically an account of or discourse about God.

Penniman once defined theology as a, “mental framework which has nothing to do with life.”[9] I imagine, however, that Penniman was referring to theology as it can be purposed and practiced at times; that is, as an ideology or systematic set of ideas about God of which one is taught and to which one learns to lend credence and credibility. Such is an exercise of seeking truth in abstractions or, in Penniman’s terms, a nearly purely, “ideological,” approach through which one, “is taught what to believe.”[10]

Having said this, Penniman was a theologian. He was influenced by the school of thought of Paul Tillich.[11] Tillich sought to mediate between Christian theology and secular thought, between religion and culture. In league with Tillich, Penniman was not as concerned to discourse about God in the abstract as he was to experience and analyze the human situation from which arose existential questions and, then, to demonstrate that (and how) the symbols of the Christian proclamation respond to these life’s inquiries. I have no doubt that Penniman was familiar with the content of the traditional Christian dogma of a God revealed in human history in the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth as that revelation is made known in the witness of the Spirit in that continuing story of Jesus’ followers, the community of the church. However, Penniman’s primary point of reference was not so much what that God has to do with human experience, but, rather, what human experience has to do with that God. To accentuate the second point, however, is not to negate the first. These are not mutually exclusive, but, rather, complementary emphases. Indeed, Penniman, beginning with human experience, ever was concerned to, “deepen,” that experience, which, in a complementary terms, “convey(s) the movement toward God.”[12] With a typically principled passion, he wrote:

I will never be able to identify myself with the Christian mythology if I reduce it to an ideology and try to identify myself by means of this. This can happen only if I have by my own death paid the price of moving within the Christian story so that it has become the story of my life. What was once a coercion of duty has been the occasion in which the Sursum Corda has been real for me and obedience is within a dimension of praise when the Sanctus rings true for me amongst the angels with whom I take my place, being identified with them in the Christian story because I’m in it.

The Categories

Penniman’s pedagogy (his view of the teaching enterprise) and his theology (his view of the relationship between human existence and God as experienced in human history) appear chiefly in The Categories or, as he termed them, “Things it should help us all to know.” The Categories are less directive or determinative principles to which one must adhere and more descriptive constructs that help one interpret or understand one’s experience of life or existence. The Categories, some borrowed[13] and others by Penniman’s own hand, are his fundamental ideas or, truly, observations about the educational endeavor (i.e., the “A” Categories or, “An indication of basic understandings that arise in the process of the work”) and about life (i.e., the “B” Categories or, “An indication of basic understandings that arise in the nature of things”).
Finally, getting to the point!

I want to focus on Penniman's theology, hence, the "B" Categories. Mindful that Penniman's calling prior to priesthood was as an engineer, we note that he wrote in a rather abbreviated and perhaps obscure style. Jim Adams did a great service in providing commentary (which I am wont to call, "the Adams Addendums to the Penniman Principles") that expands upon Penniman's thinking, hence, making The Categories more accessible. However, in a reverse movement, in this regrounding enterprise or exercise, what I would like to do is highlight in a very few words the theological principle at the heart of a given category. The theological principle, I believe, embraces or, perhaps better said, holds in a creative tension the experiential and the biblical elements of human inquiry and comprehension.

Conclusion

Such connections can be made throughout the theological "B" Categories. I make comment on these three to offer a tool as to how we, the St. Mark's community, may go about the critical task of regrounding not only our func ed discipline, but, even more importantly, regrounding our community in func ed. More work can be and will be done. This, I trust, is only a small beginning.

[2] A 1925 Dayton, Tennessee court case involving the trial of John Scopes, a high school teacher, accused of teaching evolution in the classroom. Also known as The Scopes Monkey Trial and, in its time, called, "The Trial of the Century," this case pitted the advocates of a biblical doctrine of a divinely ordained seven-day creation against the proponents of a scientific view of the gradual unfolding and development of the created order.
[3] From the commentary on Category B-17 (Sin).
[8] From the hymn, Once to every man and nation.
[9] Source unknown.
[10] From the commentary on Category A-12.
[13] The sense and substance of some of Penniman's Categories are drawn from the works of other thinkers. For example, Martin Buber (1878-1965), philosopher, theologian, and Zionist; the proponent of the I-Thou dialogical relationship (whether human with human or human with God) of love and understanding as over and against the I-It relationship of confrontation and coercion; Søren Kierkegaard (1813-55), Danish existentialist philosopher, who stressed the role of individual ethical decision making and the active engagement with truth within concrete, finite existence; and Paul Tillich.