

Living the Tension: Toward a Theologically Reflexive Methodology for Diaspora Missiology

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Abstract

Diaspora churches in North America inhabit the intersection of theological conviction and cultural complexity, navigating tensions between inherited frameworks and the pluralistic realities of their host contexts. This article proposes a theologically reflexive methodology for diaspora missiology, addressing Joel Robbins's critique of the "awkward relationship" between theology and the social sciences (Robbins, 2006). Drawing on Paul Hiebert's critical realism, Peter Berger's sociology of knowledge, and Dallas Willard's epistemic realism, the article's framework—termed *Living in Tension*—integrates theological reflection with sociocultural analysis.

Key Words: critical realism, diaspora missiology, epistemic realism, liminality, plausibility structures, theological reflexivity, *Living in Tension* framework

Introduction: Theological Method in a Fractured Age

On a Sunday morning in a modest storefront sanctuary tucked between a laundromat and a halal market, congregants gather—some in brightly patterned attire reminiscent of their homeland, others in jeans and hoodies, children weaving between pews speaking in two languages. The worship team alternates between a familiar hymn in the community's mother tongue and a contemporary chorus in English. After the service, conversations drift between prayer requests for relatives back home and questions about navigating school board politics, immigration paperwork, and workplace ethics in North America. This congregation, like many diaspora churches, lives at the intersection of two worlds—bearing the theological heritage of their sending cultures while immersed in the pluralistic, secularizing, and religiously fragmented landscape of their host society.

This intersection gives rise to a central tension: inherited theological frameworks, formed within particular historical and cultural contexts, must now engage a society marked by pluralism, privatization, and disaffiliation. Pluralism presents a mosaic of divergent worldviews, compelling Christians to engage across cultural and religious boundaries. Privatization relegates faith to the realm of personal preference, eroding its communal and public dimensions. Disaffiliation—from churches, denominations, and civic institutions—signals growing skepticism toward organized religion, forcing the church to reimagine its role. Lesslie Newbigin warned that when the gospel is confined to the private sphere it ceases to function as "public truth," forfeiting its capacity to inform culture, politics, and shared moral vision (Newbigin, 1991). In today's environment, confident statements of belief are often dismissed as dogmatic, further marginalizing Christianity in public discourse.

Peter L. Berger explains that this decline in credibility stems from changes in the "plausibility structures" that shape what people consider reasonable (Berger, 1967). In the West, such structures once upheld the Christian faith, but many have eroded. Influential institutions—including schools, media, and digital platforms—often advance secular and individualistic narratives. As these supporting structures crumble, faith is reduced to a personalized lifestyle choice, detached from

communal practices or comprehensive truth-claims (Smith, 2005). This privatization both reflects and reinforces the cultural disintegration the Church seeks to address.

These dynamics are felt acutely within diaspora communities, whose lives are shaped by the interplay of inherited theological convictions and the pluralistic, social, and epistemological realities of their host societies. Often inhabiting a “liminal” space (Pocock & Wan, 2015, p. 84), diaspora Christians experience in-betweenness that disrupts conventional notions of belonging while opening opportunities for transformation and contribution (Phan, 1999, p. 113). In North America, they must negotiate tensions between theological heritage and cultural complexity. While this positioning can lead to marginalization within both ethnic enclaves and mainstream Christianity, diaspora churches also possess distinctive capacities for developing contextual theologies that address the epistemic crisis confronting North American Christianity.

Yet traditional missiological methods fall short. Too often, theology is insulated from sociology, or sociology is detached from theology—resulting in doctrinal abstraction or culturally unmoored analysis (Robbins, 2006; Swinton & Mowat, 2006). This study responds by proposing a theologically reflexive methodology for diaspora missiology—what the article calls a “Living in Tension” framework—that integrates theological reflection with sociocultural analysis.

This approach builds on Paul Hiebert’s critical realism, which affirms that objective reality exists but that human understanding remains limited and culturally mediated (Hiebert, 1985; 1994). Critical realism offers a middle ground between naïve realism and postmodern relativism, insisting that knowledge of the world is possible yet imperfect, requiring critical methods to discern the difference between the world as it is and as we human beings perceive it. This article’s approach also draws from Dallas Willard’s epistemic realism—the conviction that human minds can apprehend objects of knowledge and that spiritual formation involves practices grounded in metaphysical realism concerning the soul, the Kingdom of God, and the Trinity (Moon, 2018).

By integrating epistemology, formation, and mission, the *Living in Tension* framework equips diaspora churches for faithful gospel witness through apologetics, evangelism, discipleship, and spiritual formation, maintaining critical awareness of epistemic and cultural location while remaining rooted in divine self-revelation. The framework affirms what Hiebert (1994, 75–92) calls “self-theologizing”—the capacity to interpret biblical revelation within a specific cultural context while preserving theological fidelity. Rather than importing frameworks wholesale or uncritically adopting North American models, diaspora churches can cultivate contextual theologies that speak prophetically to both their ethnic communities and the host culture’s epistemic fragmentation. Embracing the tension between particularity and universality, between cultural authenticity and gospel transformation, diaspora congregations can act as bridges of understanding in a polarized religious landscape, sustaining their witness to God’s reconciling work in Christ.

The Missiological Context of Diaspora Churches

The twenty-first century is characterized by an unprecedented demographic reality where significant numbers of people live outside their places of origin due to various global forces like globalization, economic factors, and conflicts. Within this shifting landscape, Christian witness in North America faces profound challenges, including rising pluralism, the increasing privatization of belief, and widespread disaffiliation from traditional institutions.

Global and Local Forces Shaping the Diaspora Experience: Globalization, Economic Change, and Conflict as Drivers of Diaspora and Mission

Globalization—marked by interconnection, mobility, and cultural homogenization—has reshaped mission. It enables partnerships across borders and brings unreached groups into Western cities, creating “mission at our doorsteps” (Lee, 2025; George, 2023). Yet it also spreads secular values and religious competition, producing a “global marketplace of religions” (Lee, 2025; Bishop, 2014). This dual reality requires theological reflexivity: churches must discern how God’s mission unfolds amid both opportunity and threat. The demographic shift of Christianity to the Global South has introduced “reverse mission,” in which non-Western Christians now evangelize former missionary-sending regions (Da Silva, 2015).

Economic change also shapes diaspora. While affluent nations supply mission resources, global disparities drive migration and marginalization of diaspora communities. Historically, missionaries leveraged economic opportunities to expand work (Cheong & Meneses, 2018). Today, instability affects the sustainability and form of mission (Global One80, 2025). Reflexively, diaspora churches must ask how to interpret economic vulnerability not as hindrance but as locus for God’s activity.

Conflict accelerates migration through war, persecution, and political unrest, creating crises where displaced populations encounter the gospel (George, 2023). Local churches often remain when expatriates withdraw, embodying witness through suffering (Wan & Gross, 2015). Jeong (2016) calls this “mission from weakness,” reframing vulnerability as theological strength. Reflexively, diaspora missiology interprets such fragility through biblical paradigms of God’s power made perfect in weakness.

Diaspora Churches in the Liminal Space: Plausibility Structures and North American Realities for Christian Witness

Globalization, economics, and conflict not only produce diaspora but also shape their theological identity. Diaspora Christians inhabit what Pocock and Wan (2015, p. 84) call a “liminal” space—disrupted identities that open new possibilities for transformation (Phan, 1999, p. 113). In North America, this liminality generates tensions between inherited theology and pluralist realities. Reflexively, these tensions become a site for theological creativity, pressing communities to articulate faith anew.

Berger’s sociology shows how belief depends on plausibility structures—social frameworks that render truth credible (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, pp. 28–79; Berger, 1967, pp. 127–54). Historically, Western churches supplied such structures, embedding Christian *nomos* into public life (Berger, 1967, pp. 19–25, 45–51). Secularization now destabilizes them, reframing faith as private preference. Reflexively, diaspora churches must sustain Christian plausibility through embodied communal life, not only defending doctrine but enacting truth in practice.

Liminality itself, grounded in van Gennep (1909) and Turner (1969, pp. 94–95), is more than sociological—it is theological. Turner (1975) notes liminality fosters *communitas*, solidarity born of marginality. For diaspora churches, this *communitas* enables them to act as cultural interpreters, embodying the gospel between homeland traditions and host culture. Bhabha’s (1994) “third space” highlights hybridity as a generative zone where new theological forms emerge. Reflexively,

this hybridity calls for ongoing discernment: contextual theologies must be critically tested by Scripture while responding to lived realities.

Biblical paradigms reinforce this reflexive lens: Israel's wilderness (Exod. 16), the sojourner identity (1 Pet. 2:11), and Christ's ministry at the margins. Jung Young Lee's (1995) theology of marginality describes diaspora as both "in-both" and "in-beyond," transcending cultural boundaries. Reflexively, diaspora churches embody a reconciled identity rooted in Christ rather than ethnicity.

By engaging multiple plausibility structures—homeland, host society, and transnational networks—diaspora churches live "in tension." Their liminality, when reflexively interpreted, becomes a theological resource: a countercultural plausibility structure and laboratory for epistemic discernment, offering a credible vision of Christian witness in pluralist North America.

Limitations of Current Missiological Methodologies

Traditional missiological frameworks, shaped largely by Western mission history, have provided a foundation for global missions but are increasingly inadequate for today's complex realities. Rooted in fixed theological assertions and pragmatic strategies for evangelization, they often prioritized church growth and replication of Western forms over deep contextual reflection (Da Silva, 2015, pp. 233–35). This reliance on individualist models of conversion, as Ross, Kim, and Johnson (2023, pp. 142–43) observe, risks sidelining communal dimensions central in non-Western contexts. Reflexively considered, such methods lack mechanisms to critique their own cultural assumptions and re-engage mission practice in light of Scripture and lived reality.

Fragmentation and Polarization

A core weakness of existing models is their polarizing dualisms: soul-saving vs. social gospel, proclamation vs. service, career missionaries vs. tentmakers. Enoch Wan argues that such fragmentation produces siloed mission activities instead of integrated witness (Wan, 2010). This tendency is particularly damaging in diaspora contexts, where congregations are often treated either as "mission fields" or pipelines for labor rather than as theological agents in their own right. Reflexivity challenges these dichotomies by pressing mission practitioners to hold together the fullness of gospel witness, critically discerning where integration is necessary.

Similarly, the emphasis on "unreached people groups" sometimes privileged distant fields over proximate diaspora communities (Wan, 2010), reducing migrants to evangelistic instruments while neglecting their social and existential struggles (Kim, 2016, pp. 149–50). Reflexively missiology insists that theology cannot abstract persons from their contexts; mission must interpret and engage the lived vulnerabilities of displaced peoples in light of God's Kingdom.

Methodological Reductionism

Existing missionary models often pursued "what works" pragmatically—church growth formulas, program replication—at the expense of contextual theology. Kim (2016, pp. 19–21, 55) critiques this reductionism, warning it risks measuring success by numbers alone while neglecting holistic discipleship. This compartmentalization extended into academic missiology, where theology of mission was often divorced from strategy. Reflexively, methodology must continually revisit both theology and context, discerning how practices align—or fail to align—with Scripture and lived reality. Without such self-critical loops, missiology becomes static and unresponsive.

Postcolonial critiques further highlight how exporting Western ecclesial models perpetuates cultural dominance. George (2021, pp. 7–9) notes that inherited geographies of “sending and receiving” ignore the polycentric nature of mission in an era of globalization and migration. His call for attention to *motus Dei*—God’s movement through people on the move—demands reflexive reexamination of anthropology, soteriology, pneumatology, and eschatology. Reflexivity here means holding inherited theology accountable to God’s work discerned in new, mobile contexts.

Theology and Social Sciences: The “Awkward Relationship”

Another challenge is the uneasy relationship between theology and the social sciences. Anthropology often dismissed the supernatural as obsolete (Shepherd, 1972, pp. 230–31), while theology resisted engagement, creating mutual suspicion (Davies, 2002, p. 2). Even with renewed anthropological interest in Christianity (Robbins, 2006, p. 285; 2018, p. 232), the relationship remains “awkward,” marked by epistemological divides over normativity (Robbins, 2018, p. 204).

Swinton and Mowat (2006, pp. 80–86) argue that detachment from sociology produces theology that is doctrinally sound yet socially disconnected, while sociology without theology yields description without missional horizon. Reflexively, missiology must integrate both: theological convictions are tested and deepened through social engagement, and sociological insights are submitted to theological discernment.

Toward Reflexive Methodology

Taken together, these critiques reveal not just methodological insufficiency but the absence of reflexive engagement. Traditional missiology often lacked the capacity to interrogate its own assumptions, contextual limitations, and cultural biases. A reflexive methodology addresses this lack by cultivating self-critical, interdisciplinary, and context-sensitive engagement that continually holds together gospel truth, theological integrity, and social reality. Without such reflexivity, missiology risks remaining bound to outdated paradigms, unable to equip the Church for faithful witness in the twenty-first century.

Foundations for a Theologically Reflexive Methodology

Developing a missiology capable of bridging theological conviction and sociocultural complexity requires grounding in frameworks that affirm truth while engaging critically with human experience. Paul Hiebert’s critical realism resists both naïve absolutism and postmodern relativism by affirming reality while acknowledging the partial, mediated nature of human knowing (Hiebert, 1985; 1994). Peter Berger’s plausibility structures illuminate how social contexts shape the credibility of belief, requiring churches to reflexively sustain witness within shifting cultural frameworks (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Berger, 1967). Dallas Willard’s epistemic realism reinforces these commitments by affirming that divine and moral truth is genuinely knowable and must shape discipleship, evangelism, and formation (Willard, 1998; 2009). Together, these perspectives scaffold a methodology that is reflexive, socially engaged, and missionally resilient.

Hiebert’s Critical Realism

Hiebert’s critical realism mediates between naïve realism, which assumes exact knowledge of reality, and postmodern relativism, which denies objective truth altogether. Critical realism is *realistic*, affirming an objective world, and *critical*, recognizing that human apprehension of

reality is partial, approximate, and culturally mediated (Hiebert, 1999, pp. 289–90). This combination enables theology to remain tethered to Scripture as divine revelation while acknowledging that interpretation is always situated (Hiebert, 1999, pp. 334–39).

This reflexive epistemology safeguards against two extremes that distort mission. Naïve realism, often aligned with Western positivism, universalized Western cultural forms and neglected the “middle level” of spiritual realities central to non-Western worldviews (Hiebert, 1982, pp. 122–29; 1999, pp. 214–15). Postmodern relativism, by contrast, reduces truth claims to useful fictions, eroding the uniqueness of Christ and the impetus for evangelism (Hiebert, 1999, pp. 233–78). Critical realism avoids both by affirming truth while acknowledging mediation (Hiebert, 1999, pp. 300, 326).

Theologically reflexive practice emerges here: missionaries are freed to proclaim gospel truth with confidence while engaging cultures with humility, subjecting both inherited theology and local practices to communal discernment. Hiebert’s emphasis on community hermeneutics (1999, pp. 328–30, 343) ensures that theology is not constructed in isolation but reflexively refined through dialogue across cultures and contexts. This interaction grounds critical contextualization—evaluating cultural forms against Scripture without erasing local identity (Hiebert, 1999, pp. 360–61).

Berger’s Plausibility Structures

Berger’s sociology of knowledge provides tools for reflexively analyzing how social contexts render faith credible. Plausibility structures are the social bases—institutions, rituals, conversations—through which beliefs are reinforced (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p. 7). Historically, the Church functioned as the primary plausibility structure in the West, embedding Christian nomos into public life (Berger, 1967, pp. 19–25, 45–51). Secularization, however, has fractured these structures, recasting faith as private preference (Berger, 1967, pp. 127–54; 2014, p. 51).

Reflexivity here requires churches to recognize that plausibility is not secured by doctrine alone but by lived, communal practices. Berger shows that without such reinforcement, faith loses its self-evident force (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, pp. 176–78; Berger, 1979, pp. 171–73). In pluralist contexts, individuals must actively choose belief—the “heretical imperative” (Berger, 1979, pp. 11–26). For diaspora churches, this imperative means reflexively cultivating practices—bilingual worship, intergenerational catechesis, intercultural hospitality—that sustain credibility amid competing frameworks.

Berger’s work also resists relativism: though all knowledge is socially situated, not all truth claims are equal (Woodhead, 2001, p. 4; Imber, 2023, p. vii). Reflexively, missiology can use sociological analysis not to relativize the gospel but to strengthen its plausibility through embodied apologetics and communal witness (Guinness, 2015, p. 161). Berger’s notion of “signals of transcendence” (1969) further enables reflexive bridge-building, connecting human experiences of meaning and longing with theological truth.

Willard’s Epistemic Realism

Willard complements Hiebert and Berger by insisting that Christian truth is not mere belief or cultural construct but genuine knowledge. For Willard, truth corresponds to reality: “a thought or statement is true provided that what it is about is as it is represented” (Willard, 1998, p. 142). This

epistemic realism resists the privatization of faith, locating discipleship in the realm of public, warranted knowledge (Moon, 2018, pp. 198–205).

In a reflexive frame, Willard's emphasis on knowledge critiques both secular reductionism and internal Christian tendencies to relegate faith to opinion. His notion of the "disappearance of moral knowledge" (Willard, 2009, pp. 2–3; Willard et al., 2018) highlights how Western institutions have stripped morality from public discourse. Reflexively, diaspora churches must reassert moral knowledge not as cultural nostalgia but as embodied truth validated in transformed lives (Willard, 2009, p. 184).

Willard's framework also reshapes mission praxis. Evangelism is not manipulation but invitation to reality; apologetics is a "helping ministry" clarifying reasons for hope ("Knowledge in the Context of Spiritual Formation"); discipleship is internalizing reality as it truly is (Willard, 1998, p. 316). Reflexively, this calls diaspora communities to examine whether their practices communicate Christianity as objective, public truth or as ethnic identity and private tradition.

Willard's "curriculum for Christlikeness" (Willard, 1998, pp. 320–23) illustrates reflexivity in formation: practices like solitude, study, and worship reshape thought, emotion, and habit to align naturally with God's Kingdom. For diaspora churches negotiating conflicting plausibility structures, such disciplines enable believers to live integrally across cultures (Willard, 1998, pp. 145, 431). Reflexivity here ensures that formation is not insular but oriented toward credible public witness.

Together, Hiebert, Berger, and Willard provide the foundations for a theologically reflexive missiology. Hiebert safeguards truth while enabling contextual engagement; Berger reveals how plausibility requires communal enactment; Willard grounds discipleship in public knowledge of reality. Each, in different ways, insists that theology must continually test itself in dialogue with context while remaining accountable to divine revelation. For diaspora churches, this reflexivity is not optional but essential: it equips them to live in tension, negotiate pluralist contexts, and embody the gospel as both true and credible in North America's fragmented landscape.

The "Living in Tension" Framework for Diaspora Missiology

Over the past half-century, the plausibility of Christian claims in North America has eroded, as Berger (1967) observed in his analysis of "plausibility structures"—the social frameworks that make belief credible. Where once public institutions reinforced Christianity, today secular, pluralist, and individualist narratives dominate education, media, and digital culture. The result, as Smith and Denton (2009) show, is the rise of "Moralistic Therapeutic Deism," a privatized, therapeutic form of faith detached from thick communal traditions (Berger, 1967; Guinness, 2024, p. 21). For diaspora churches, this erosion is compounded by their liminal position between inherited traditions and host-culture pluralism (Pocock & Wan, 2015, p. 84; Phan, 1999, p. 113).

Inherited traditions, especially vernacular expression, however, could potentially provide diaspora churches with crucial counter to the erosion of plausibility structures in secular and pluralist contexts. Kwame Bediako argues that using the vernacular is essential because God communicates in our languages, making the gospel more understandable and credible through familiar linguistic categories (Bediako, 2010, pp. 17–19). Andrew Walls similarly emphasizes translation as intrinsic to Christian identity, grounding the translatability of Scripture in the incarnation itself as the first act of divine translation (Walls, 1996, p. 26). Situated between

multiple linguistic and cultural worlds, diaspora churches are tasked with thoughtfully negotiating inherited vernacular expressions and host-culture pluralism appropriately.

The Living in Tension framework offers a theologically reflexive methodology for such churches. It seeks neither nostalgic preservation of homeland forms nor assimilation into secular privatization but ongoing discernment: testing theological convictions and ministry practices at the intersection of Scripture and social reality, gospel and culture.

Gaps in Traditional Missiology

Traditional mission paradigms, forged in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, often emphasized fixed doctrinal assertions paired with pragmatic strategies for church planting and growth (Da Silva 2015). Ross, Kim, and Johnson (2023) argue that such methods privileged Western individualism, sidelining communal dimensions vital in non-Western settings. Reflexively viewed, these models lacked mechanisms to interrogate their own cultural biases.

Enoch Wan (2010) highlights the dualisms—soul vs. body, proclamation vs. service, career vs. bi-vocational missions—that fragmented witness. In diaspora contexts, this fragmentation reduced immigrant congregations to mission “fields” or sending pipelines, ignoring their agency. Postcolonial critiques deepen the problem: mission as cultural export perpetuates methodological reductionism (Kim, 2016, pp. 19–21, 55, 149–50). George (2021, pp. 7–9) warns that inherited geographies of “sending and receiving” obscure today’s polycentric reality of mission and the *motus Dei*—God’s movement through global migration.

Finally, the relationship between theology and the social sciences has often been “awkward” (Robbins, 2006, pp. 285–94). Anthropology tended to reduce religion to function (Shepherd, 1972, pp. 230–31), while theology often engaged sociology defensively (Davies, 2002). This mutual suspicion left theology abstract and sociology without a normative horizon (Swinton & Mowat, 2006, pp. 80–85). Reflexively, missiology requires ongoing dialogue where theology tests social insight and social analysis refines theological praxis.

How the “Living in Tension” Framework Addresses These Gaps

The Living in Tension framework integrates apologetics, evangelism, discipleship, and formation into a coherent, reflexive witness. Hiebert’s critical realism affirms that theology is accountable to objective truth while recognizing cultural mediation (Hiebert, 1999). Berger’s sociology shows that belief endures only when embodied in communal plausibility structures (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Willard’s epistemic realism grounds discipleship in public truth, resisting privatization and affirming knowledge of God as reality (Willard, 1998).

In practice, apologetics gains credibility not through abstract argument alone but when beliefs are embodied in practices such as hospitality, justice, and worship that render Christianity experientially credible within pluralist contexts; evangelism initiates believers into communal life (Abraham, 1989); discipleship equips for faithful cross-cultural formation (Hiebert, 1994; Willard, 1998); and, formation prepares for credible public presence (Willard, 1998; Smith, 2005). Reflexively tested against Scripture and context, these interwoven practices sustain diaspora churches as living plausibility structures, offering a credible and integrative gospel witness in pluralist North America.

The Living in Tension framework addresses the shortcomings of traditional missiology not simply by adding new strategies but by embedding theological reflexivity into the very process of mission. Grounded in Hiebert's realism, Berger's sociology, and Willard's epistemic vision, the living in tension posture equips diaspora churches to sustain plausibility, resist privatization, and embody gospel truth in pluralist North America. In doing so, diaspora communities can model, for the wider church, how reflexive engagement of theology and context can yield credible, integrative, and transformative witness.

Practical Expressions of the Framework: A Thought Experiment

Diaspora churches in North America navigate liminal spaces shaped by migration, secularization, and pluralism. Berger (1967) reminds us that plausibility structures that once sustained Christian credibility have eroded, while George (2021) emphasizes that global migration has created mission "at our doorsteps." In this setting, apologetics, evangelism, discipleship, and spiritual formation cannot function as isolated tasks. They must be reflexively integrated—tested against Scripture, informed by social realities, and woven into communal life—to render the gospel both plausible and transformative.

The Fragmented Landscape: Forces Shaping Diaspora Missiology

The dominant cultural institutions in North America promote secular, pluralist, and individualist narratives that erode Christian plausibility (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p. 7; Guinness, 2024, p. 21). In this context, diaspora churches occupy a liminal "in-between" position (Pocock & Wan, 2015, p. 84; Phan, 1999, p. 113; Bhabha, 1994, pp. 218–20), vulnerable to marginalization yet also uniquely positioned to bridge worlds. Reflexively, fulfilling that opportunity requires acknowledging how forces that disintegrate plausibility can simultaneously be engaged as theological opportunities for witness.

The Integrative Imperative: Why Fragmentation Fails

When disciplines operate in isolation, they fracture witness. *Apologetics alone* defends ideas without lived plausibility (Guinness, 2015, p. 161; Berger, 1967, p. 56). *Evangelism alone* reduces mission to decisions rather than lifelong apprenticeship (Abraham, 1989, pp. 18–19). *Discipleship alone* risks privatization, fostering inward piety without public credibility (Willard, 1998, pp. 320–23). *Spiritual formation alone* produces depth without missional direction, a "monasticism without mission" (Willard, 2002; Smith, 2005).

Reflexively, this fragmentation mirrors cultural disintegration—individualism, privatization, consumerism (Smith & Denton, 2005; Ross, Kim, & Johnson, 2023). What is needed is not programmatic addition but integration: an interpretive posture that continually tests whether practices cohere with the gospel and with each other.

The "Living in Tension" Framework: An Integrative Model for Diaspora Churches

The Living in Tension framework grounds this reflexivity in three pillars:

- *Hiebert's critical realism* affirms objective truth while recognizing the cultural mediation of all knowing, fostering humility and contextual.
- *Berger's plausibility structures* highlight that Christian truth must be embodied in community life to be persuasive, making churches themselves living plausibility structures.

- Willard's *epistemic realism* anchors mission in the conviction that Christian claims are public truth, resisting privatization.

Practically, apologetics becomes embodied in hospitality and justice. Evangelism is integrated into catechesis and sacramental life. Discipleship equips believers for cross-cultural tensions, in the company of 'others,' and spiritual formation prepares believers for public plausibility.

In reflexively holding these practices together, diaspora churches embody a theology that is not static but continually discerned in lived tension between gospel and context. This integrative reflexivity enables diaspora communities to resist fragmentation, sustain credibility, and witness to God's reconciling reign in pluralist North America.

Conclusion

Pluralism, privatization, and disaffiliation erode the plausibility structures that once sustained Christian faith in North America, rendering fragmented approaches to mission inadequate. The Living in Tension framework integrates theology and sociology into a reflexive, contextually grounded missiology. Drawing on Hiebert's critical realism, Berger's sociology of knowledge, and Willard's epistemic realism, the framework equips the church to engage culture with humility and confidence, fostering communities where the gospel is credible, embodied, and transformative. Situated in liminality, diaspora churches can model for the wider Church how to inhabit the "third space" faithfully, embodying and proclaiming Christ's reconciling reign in a pluralistic age.

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