

# Theologically Reflective Practice: A Key Tool for Contemporary Ministry

Neil Sims

The fast pace of modern ministry often leaves little time or space to plan or assess strategies already in motion or stop long enough to consider the implications of our pastoral actions. These demands work against the thoughtful integration of context, theology, and practice in ministry. Karl Edwards has described the fast pace of ministry today in this way:

We often find ourselves defaulting to a pragmatism that reflects neither our values nor our beliefs. Instead of being equipped with how to do ministry, we need to be equipped with how to approach ministry... We become reflective practitioners who can insightfully evaluate the issues of one's ministry context, ask meaningful and probing questions of the Bible and one's theological tradition, and then continue to act, lead, choose and do.<sup>1</sup>

New situations constantly present unique challenges to ministerial competence. Although theological schools cannot possibly train future ministers for every conceivable situation, they can and must form them in theologically reflective practice. This capacity for reflection is of growing importance given the complexity of ministry in an increasingly pluralistic world. In this essay, I intend to develop our understanding of theologically reflective practice by:

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- reviewing the classic work of Donald Schön who sees the professional as a reflective practitioner,<sup>2</sup>
- building on this with the adult learning cycle of Donald Wolfe and David Kolb,<sup>3</sup> and
- enhancing this process for the practice of ministry by raising appropriate theological questions for each stage of the learning cycle.

Schön emphasizes the importance of reflective practice and Wolfe and Kolb offer a methodology for reflective practice. I will argue the significance of *theologically* reflective practice and provide a four-step process parallel to Kolb.

### THE REFLECTIVE PRACTITIONER

Since Schön wrote about the reflective practitioner, this phrase has been commonly adopted as a term to describe the way people ought to engage in nursing, in education, and in ministry—in any profession—as life-long learners. Mark Smith describes Schön’s approach as ‘canonical’ because of the frequency with which it is appealed to by trainers in a variety of professional fields.”<sup>4</sup> Schön begins with:

[T]he assumption that competent practitioners usually know more than they can say. They exhibit a kind of knowing-in-practice, most of which is tacit...Indeed practitioners themselves often reveal a capacity for reflection on their intuitive knowing in the midst of action and sometimes use this capacity to cope with the unique, uncertain, and conflicted situations of practice.<sup>5</sup>

The search for an “epistemology of practice implicit in the artistic, intuitive processes which some practitioners do bring” to difficult and demanding situations<sup>6</sup> raises this question: “Is there a knowing that comes from our practice?” When someone tells of the death of a loved one, do we simply know how to respond? When a world crisis takes place, do we know almost without thinking how we will acknowledge that as part of worship? Schön says that we draw on our *repertoire*. “Practitioners build up a collection of images, ideas, examples and actions that they can draw upon.”<sup>7</sup> Have we formed a bank of possible pastoral responses available when there is no time to think? Herbert Anderson refers to this process as “*forming a pastoral habitus* so that our responses in ministry are like breathing.”<sup>8</sup> Previous ministry experiences contribute to a fund of knowing that informs our response without thinking too deeply. Our repertoire may enable us to engage in *knowing-in-action*.

*Reflection-in-action* is similar to what is popularly called “thinking on our feet.”<sup>9</sup> This is central to the ‘art’ by which in ministry we deal with “situations of uncertainty, instability, uniqueness, and value conflict.”<sup>10</sup> We are often confronted with unexpected situations in which we need to make a judgment on the spot—with or without careful thinking. The internal conversation that develops in our reflection-in-action “extends thinking in the tests, moves, and probes of experimental action, and reflection feeds on doing and its results.”<sup>11</sup>

Sometimes, when we look back on a pastoral encounter or a ministry event, we are aware that there is room for improvement in the way we minister. We know we need to do more critical thinking about a particular issue or doctrine, or we know we need to take stock of our behaviour or attitudes. There is, therefore, a need for *reflection-on-action* after the event. This reflective practice is more intentional and sustained. For example, in my early years in ministry, I thought about how I could make my preparation of parents for the baptism of their children more effective. This *reflection-on-action* is a form of research which serves to build up one’s *repertoire* for ministry practice.

Ideal reflection for ministers asks questions of their current practice in order to inform and enhance their future ministry. This is called *reflection-for-action*, or reflection that looks forward.<sup>12</sup> Ministers who continue to practise this reflection for the sake of their future ministry enhance the quality of their future service. Reflective practice for professionals includes *knowing-in-action*, *reflection-in-action*, *reflection-on-action*, and *reflection-for-action*. Continuing practice of these processes is a prerequisite for our growth as professionals in ministry. However, there is a danger if we rely too heavily on our *knowing-in-action* and we spend much time ministering on auto-pilot. It may mean that we begin to treat all people the same and stop listening to the particular story of the particular person(s) before us.

#### A MINISTRY OF CONTINUAL LEARNING

Unless we engage in reflective practice, we are in danger of repeating mistakes made earlier in our ministries. Without reflective practice we may overlook the huge changes happening in the world around us and to our ministry. The dilemma is that it may be easier for others to recognize that we really stopped learning when we finished our theological studies. Without careful reflection, ministry is in danger of losing its vitality.

When candidates for ministry within the Uniting Church in Queensland, Australia go into field education placements for twelve months, they are expected to do more than fieldwork. They are expected to learn from practising ministry.<sup>13</sup> It is education in context or in the 'field.' It is not about filling gaps in the ministry of the local congregation but rather about filling gaps in the student's learning for their future practice. I take heart when students write at the end of their field placement, "I believe I am now ready to take up ministry." I am a little dismayed when they may say to me later, "You didn't teach us about this at Trinity." They then describe a new and unexpected situation that could not have been part of their training. What I hope they have learned is the capacity to stop and think about a ministry situation in order to respond constructively.

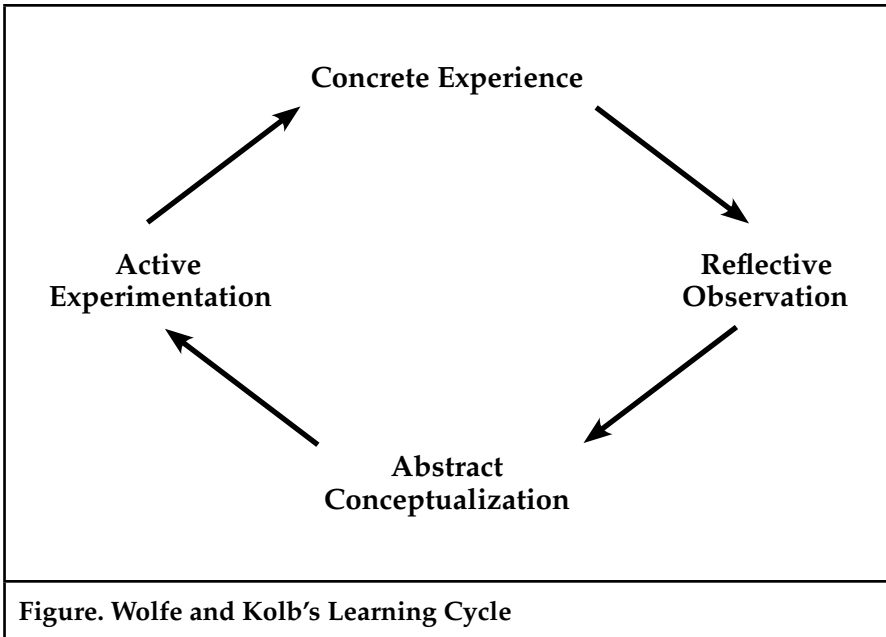
In order to develop this practice, we require them to write critically reflective reports on their ministry experiences. What did they do well? What was difficult? Were there logistical issues? What surprised them? How did the family receive their ministry? How did they sense that God was active in this situation? Would they do anything differently the next time? "When students experience reflective learning in fieldwork, they gain confidence in responding to the unpredictable nature of practice."<sup>14</sup> *Action and reflection* together are the stuff of adult learning. This is the beginning of becoming a reflective practitioner. Emily Click argues that some of our most significant learning happens when we reflect. This kind of "contemplation is crucial to effective professional functioning because it surfaces foundational assumptions and interpretations."<sup>15</sup> The continuing discipline of theologically reflective practice equips us to face most, if not all, of the challenges of ministry.

There was a time when ministers were trained and ordained, and that training was expected to resource them for a lifetime of ministry. Now, as with all other professions, there is a common expectation that ministers will annually engage in professional development or continuing education for ministry. In addition, a contributing factor to the continuing quality of one's ministry may be "regular professional supervision."<sup>16</sup> Both of these activities help foster reflective practice.

#### THE CYCLE OF ADULT LEARNING FROM EXPERIENCE

Typically much adult learning is integrally related to life experience, and often goes through a number of steps or phases unconsciously. It often starts

with a particular personal experience. Wolfe and Kolb have identified four different learning modes, part of an experiential learning cycle that is a useful descriptive model of this kind of adult learning.<sup>17</sup>



**Figure. Wolfe and Kolb's Learning Cycle**

Effective adult learning from experience requires that learners give full value to each of these four stages of learning. To fail to learn at any one of these stages is a major obstacle to the whole learning experience.

When these stages are applied to ministry, the first stage is about learning to engage in ministry constructively. The second stage requires reflection on, and analysis of, a ministry event. The third stage is about relating one's understanding of what happened to what one already knows—making sense of the experience in terms of one's personal worldview or theology. Once the learning from this experience has been integrated into one's theology and worldview, there are fresh implications for one's decision-making and further ministry. Most adult learning does not involve conscious movement systematically through the four stages. However, this combination of action and reflection is a cyclical process that ultimately contributes to better quality action and then even more mature reflection.

The following table gives some further definition to the four stages of adult learning. The first three columns are from Kolb.<sup>18</sup> I have added the last column which provides a *theological perspective*.

Learning Strategy	Learning Environment	Primary Mode	Theological Perspective
Concrete Experience	Emphasizing Personal Experiences	Feeling or Getting Involved	Sensing the Presence and Action of God
Reflective Observation	Understanding Concepts	Watching	Discerning God's Purpose
Abstract Conceptualization	Preferred Logical Thinking	Creating Ideas	Integrating Into One's Theology
Active Experimentation	Applying Knowledge and Skills	Making Decisions and Doing	Deciding to Co-Operate with God

**Table. Further Definition to the Four Stages of Adult Learning**

If we only use the language of learning from our society as the basis for our reflection, then there is no space for the language of faith or theological reflection. However, when we are in ministry, to act with integrity is to use the language of faith as a way of keeping open to God's presence and activity. Nouwen writes that:

[T]heological reflection is reflecting on the painful and joyful realities of every day with the mind of Jesus and thereby raising human consciousness to the knowledge of God's gentle guidance. This is a hard discipline, since God's presence is often a hidden presence that needs to be discovered.<sup>19</sup>

If the primary language of our reflection is the language of education or psychology or management, we are in danger of shutting ourselves off from God.

Nouwen suggested (in 1989) that most Christian leaders raise psychological and sociological questions, and so are pseudo-psychologists and pseudo-social workers or sociologists.<sup>20</sup> Specifically *theological* reflection assists ministers in their openness to God and to God's call on their lives. Click puts it this way:

Ministerial reflection is the crucial key to all the work of ministry. For only through careful consideration can you put together pieces that otherwise seem disjointed, irrelevant, or confusing. Reflection enables you to weave the integrative thread that you will then offer to the community as its members weave the tapestry of God's missional purpose in its midst.<sup>21</sup>

Consider a fictional case with these four stages. A young minister lost his temper with the Secretary during a regular Church Council meeting (concrete experience). The Secretary, a key leader in the congregation, told him that several longstanding members were complaining about the intro-

duction of more contemporary songs into their main worship service. The minister had reacted, "If you want to grow as a congregation, you need to welcome some change in your congregational life. I can't minister here if you are not ready for change." There was an awkward and tense silence in the room when the meeting ended. On his way home, the young minister wondered how it got that bad so quickly. He went over and over the event in his mind, examining his attitudes and those of the Secretary. He remembered reading that changing congregational culture is a slow process. He rang his more senior colleague who was unable to attend that specific meeting but was able to give him a more objective perspective (reflective observation). Then he went back to his notes on conflict resolution. He also prayerfully studied the concept of reconciliation in the New Testament (abstract conceptualisation). He realized that he needed to apologize, not so much for what he said, but how he said it, and he needed to do it promptly, face-to-face. Finally, he also determined to name what issues were important for him and to invite the Secretary to explain what was critical to him and how he felt (active experimentation).

#### THEOLOGICALLY REFLECTIVE MINISTRY

If we follow Kolb's experiential learning cycle regularly (including using the theological perspectives in the fourth column) in order to increase our effectiveness in ministry, then I suggest that our reflective practice will include *all* the following stages:

- *Sensing the presence and action of God:* In a ministry situation we will be seeking to discern where God is present and how God is acting. This will require a certain humility and attentiveness on our part.
- *Discerning God's purpose:* In standing back from the situation, we will be reflecting on God's desires for the person(s) with whom we are ministering as well as God's hopes for the way we are ministering. Perhaps there will be some new conclusions about the nature and purpose of God.
- *Integrating into one's theology:* As we consider our experience of God's presence and action and discern God's purpose, we ask if this is consistent with the current practice of our faith and ministry. This may not be a simple task and may take a long time to move towards a resolution. We may live with some ambiguity for some time, yet knowing where the tensions are within our theology.
- *Deciding to co-operate with God:* Our theology may have been revised somewhat and so lead to new implications for our ministry practice. Whether this is the case or not, our attentiveness to the presence and action of God in a particular ministry situation and our reflection on God's purposes will give

us some clues about our continuing ministry practice and ultimately lead to some decisions for future ministry encounters.

Let's return to our young minister in his conflict with the Secretary of the congregation and apply the four theological perspectives to his situation.

#### *Sensing the Presence and Action of God*

By the time the young minister and his experienced colleague came together for their weekly planning meeting, the following picture had emerged from their informal conversations with some of the members of Church Council. A more spiritually-minded councillor felt that they had left God behind once they had completed the opening devotions and got on with the business of the meeting. Another shared what she sensed was pain on God's part over the conflict. A third member agreed with what the young minister said in his outburst and wondered if the Secretary would have been better to give this feedback to the minister privately. The Secretary, in a conversation with the senior minister, insisted on the lack of wisdom in the way the young minister responded; he apparently didn't like being challenged. Two more experienced councillors saw this as part of the normal settling into ministry of a new minister and trusted that God would help them negotiate their differences in due course.

#### *Discerning God's Purpose*

The young minister came home from the meeting wondering whether this was God's way of telling him that he shouldn't have become a minister. He was relieved to learn from his colleague that other members of the Church Council also got irritated with the Secretary. The colleague went on to say, "When we pull together as a team, the Secretary is a great asset, and he will get over your outburst." The young minister sensed God reminding him that he was too quick to want his own way. He felt the discomfort of being 'at odds' with the Secretary and thought more deeply about how he could work in partnership with the Secretary and all of the Church Council. Ministry was not just what he was and did, but also about the worship, witness, and service of the whole congregation. The incident reminded him that he needed to take better care of himself. If he hadn't been so stressed, maybe he wouldn't have lost his temper. In his prayer, he resolved to listen more to the leaders of the congregation so he would work better with them, and to respect his day off each week.

#### *Integrating into One's Theology*

The initial response of the young minister was that he had misunderstood God's call to him. On further reflection, he concluded that it was not a reason to doubt God's call. When he blurted out his ideas about how the con-



gregation should function, God reminded him through his colleague of the importance of belonging to the Christian community alongside bringing one's own perspective. He did not regret what he said, because he genuinely believed it, but he did regret how he said it. There were going to be more awkward and tense moments in Church Council and the challenge would be to work through them with grace, sensitivity, and honesty. Living together as Christ's disciples would be a continual learning process. God gently confronted him with the place of proper self-care within one's calling to discipleship. These were convictions that he already had given intellectual assent to, but now he knew that he needed to live these out for the sake of the health of the congregation, and his own health.

#### *Deciding to Co-operate with God*

The young minister knew that his attitude in raising his voice at the Secretary was unacceptable. He knew, consistent with God's call to live in community, that he had to go promptly and apologize, face-to-face, taking full responsibility for his actions. He knew that living in community did not mean agreeing on everything, but being honest about differences. It was as important to listen to the Secretary's perspective as it was for him to name his own. Careful listening to God and others was to become something he worked on to foster Christian community. He would also trust his colleague to guide him in working with the leaders of the congregation and to keep him accountable with his self-care.

### CONCLUSIONS

If we regularly engage in this kind of reflective practice, we will find that our learning is *deep*, which is qualitatively different from much *surface* learning. Michael Prosser and Keith Trigwell describe this deep learning for students in this way:

In a deep approach, students aim to understand ideas and seek meanings. They engage with the learning task, trying to relate new things to other things that they know. In a surface approach, students see tasks as being imposed on them and they have the intention to cope with these requirements. Overall they would appear to be involved in study without reflection on either purpose or strategy. The structure of the awareness of students adopting a deep approach is broader and more inclusive than for students adopting a surface approach.<sup>22</sup>

This kind of learning in the context of our faith is holistic, engaging our whole being. It is not purely individual learning, but also relational learn-

ing. It is about the gaining of information, growing in understanding, moving towards coherence in our theological foundation, developing skills and competencies, shaping our attitudes, clarifying our values and beliefs, and acknowledging our abilities and limits.

Quality ministry is much more likely when it includes *theologically reflective practice*. The action/practice and theological reflection go hand-in-hand and complement each other. Our *repertoire* in ministry starts with some basic *knowing-in-action* from our initial formation processes, as well as our previous experiences in the church. *Reflection-in-action*, *reflection-on-action*, and *reflection-for action* will each expand our *repertoire* of *knowing-in-action*. So Schön offers practical wisdom about being reflective practitioners. But how do we engage in that *reflection-on-action* and *reflection-for-action*? Kolb's *experiential learning cycle* offers a useful method for the reflective practitioner. However, for ministers and their integrity, this reflection must be done through a theological lens. *Sensing the presence and action of God, discerning God's purpose, integrating these into one's theology, and deciding to co-operate with God* are four clear steps for theologically reflective practice.

This pattern of reflection is a way of building "muscles for a lifetime of interpreting situations;"<sup>23</sup> to borrow an image from Emily Click. When we are confronted by complex challenges, or if we are losing our vitality in ministry, or if we are failing to negotiate the stresses of the role, the kind of theological reflection I am advocating will certainly help. It enhances our capacity to function outside our comfort with confidence that we have something to offer to those in need. If we are currently negotiating with hope this demanding calling, it is probable that our ministry could already be described as *theologically reflective practice*.

#### NOTES

1. Karl Edwards, "Looking Ahead to the Next Challenge," *The Front Line* (Pasadena, CA: Fuller Theological Seminary Doctor of Ministry Program newsletter, June 2003), 6.
2. Donald A. Schön, *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action* (New York: Basic Books, 1983) and Donald A. Schön, *Educating the Reflective Practitioner* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1987).
3. Donald M. Wolfe and David A. Kolb, "Career Development, Personal Growth, and Experiential Learning," in *Issues in Career and Human Resource Development* (Madison, WI: American Society for Training and Development, 1980), 128.
4. Mark K. Smith, "Donald Schön: Learning, Reflection and Change," *The Encyclopaedia of Informal Education*, 2001, available online at: <http://www.infed.org/thinkers/et-schon.htm> (Last accessed June 29, 2010).

5. Schön, *The Reflective Practitioner*, viii–ix.
6. *Ibid.*, 49.
7. Smith, “Donald Schön;” *Ibid.*, 138.
8. Herbert Anderson, personal communication, December 21, 2010.
9. Schön, *The Reflective Practitioner*, 54.
10. *Ibid.*, 50.
11. *Ibid.*, 280.
12. Lynn McAlpine and Cynthia Weston, “Reflection: Issues Related to Improving Professors’ Teaching and Students’ Learning,” *Instructional Science* 28, nos. 5–6 (2002): 363–385.
13. Trinity Theological College, *Field Education Handbook 2010*, available online at: [http://www.trinity.qld.edu.au/data/fieldEd%20handbook\\_master.pdf](http://www.trinity.qld.edu.au/data/fieldEd%20handbook_master.pdf) (Last accessed July 5, 2010).
14. Gwen Ellis, “Reflective Learning and Supervision,” in *Fieldwork in the Human Services: Theory and Practice for Field Educators, Practice Teachers and Supervisors*, Lesley Cooper and Lynne Briggs, eds. (St. Leonards, NSW, Australia: Allen and Unwin, 2000), 227.
15. Emily Click, “Ministerial Reflection,” in *Welcome to Theological Field Education*, Matt Floding, ed. (Herndon, VA: Alban, 2011), 36, 32.
16. This is required within the Uniting Church in Australia: Uniting Church in Australia, “Code of Ethics and Ministry Practice,” 2009, 3.9 (d).
17. Wolfe and Kolb, “Career Development, Personal Growth, and Experiential Learning,” 128.
18. David Kolb, *Experiential Learning as the Source of Learning and Development* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1984). The primary modes and theological perspectives have been added to Kolb, the latter by the author while the source of the modes is unknown.
19. Henri Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus* (London, UK: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1989), 68–69.
20. *Ibid.*, 65–66.
21. Click, “Ministerial Reflection,” 32.
22. Michael Prosser and Keith Trigwell, *Understanding Learning and Teaching: The Experience in Higher Education* (Buckingham, UK: SRHE and Open University Press, 1999), 14.
23. Click, “Ministerial Reflection,” 36.