

## The Power of Imagination—From Stagecoach to Bullet Trains

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We all know imagination to be a powerful force that inspires change, renewal, and sometimes, in extreme moments, even revolution. Imagination is the force that empowers people to dream of that which is currently out of reach; it empowers humanity to picture a state of being that does not yet exist and supplies the energy necessary to strive for that new reality. It is the force that allowed the first followers of Christ to dream of a different world, an entirely different kind of society, one not blighted by the oppressive structures and persecutory policies of the Roman Empire. It was imagination that helped them conceive of a social structure shaped by equity and inclusion to represent more fully God's Kin-dom. Imagine is the word and the concept that inspired John Lennon to write one of the most iconic musical masterpieces of all time. In this beautiful piece of poetry, he invites us to envision a future ruled by love and not hate, ruled by dreams and not cynicism, of a future built on sharing and not hoarding, built on peace and not violence. "You may say I'm a dreamer / But I'm not the only one / I hope someday you'll join us / And the world will be as one."<sup>1</sup>

Okay, so I'm not going to equate the work of field education with the power of iconic pop songs or revolutionary religious movements. But my point is to think about the nature of imagination and the power it generates to infuse us with a sense of what might be possible, to inspire us to consider a future not yet encountered but for which we long. I want us to think about imagination as the "image-making power of the mind; the act of mentally creating or reproducing an object not previously perceived."<sup>2</sup> I claim in this article, in line with the theme of this issue, that it has always been the power of imagination that has moved humanity forward and has provided the inspirational force necessary to think creatively. It is only through the power of imagination that we can blaze new trails and dream new dreams. Imagination, I believe, holds the key for those

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of us who find ourselves in the work of field education to address the challenges that threaten the very viability of the church. It is up to us to find ways to prepare women and men for ministerial leadership in newly imagined ways that will equip them to build the bridge to the emerging forms of church and communal life as they work alongside God's people whom they serve. This is no small task.

As we think about the state of constant flux that the church and society have been experiencing over the past decade, not including the game-changing reality that COVID-19 has wrought, we realize that the old paradigms by which we used to understand ministerial leadership are no longer sufficient to meet the needs of this shifting landscape. Through all the change forces at work, we must also address the truth that our old tested and trusted models for preparing persons for a calling to ministerial leadership are no longer entirely effective or useful in shaping the kinds of leaders needed to address this emerging reality. So, then, we must draw on the power of imagination to conceive anew how God might invite us into this crucial work of leadership preparation. For, if we are to be faithful to the words of Jesus in Revelation 21, we must believe that even in our humble work of preparing leaders for the church and the world, God is indeed able to make all things new.

Early on in my journey as a field educator in 2007, I served as the administrative support staff for the professor of ministry formation at Bethany Theological Seminary, Dr. Tara Hornbacker. I learned so much from her about the importance of how our school had chosen to prepare and shape ministerial leaders. Perhaps one of the most important things I learned from her was that constant evaluation of the process and our curriculum was essential to staying ahead of the change curve. Part of what that meant was ensuring that we were faithfully preparing leaders who could serve the church of the now and of the not yet. Stepping in and figuring out how to adapt to this liminal reality and liminal space was always uppermost in her mind and in her approach to training for ministerial leadership.

This was a difficult balance to strike, preparing ministers for competent leadership in this liminal space. In some corners of the academy, we heard voices suggesting it was useless to prepare ministerial leaders for today's church because it was clearly dying. What we needed to do was prepare leadership who could help usher in the church that was emerging. There were other, competing voices that were mostly emanating from those churches we were advised to forget and leave behind. Those ecclesial voices were crying out for ministerial leaders who could lead them as the people of God that they are today.

Holding these competing voices in tension was always my predecessor's strength. She knew there was truth coming from each source. We could not just prepare ministerial leaders for the existing church, and we could not just prepare religious leaders who were solely focused on the church that was still emerging. Each end of that pole meant that some would be left out of the work of the church, and that was unacceptable.

That is why we pursued a grant from the Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion to ignite our imaginations toward how we might better meet the leadership needs of changing church and cultural landscapes. The work of this grant in 2011 opened the door for us to examine our process thoroughly and to lean into the demanding task of redesign.

Metaphor is often an engine that powers the work of imagination. The power of the metaphor allows us to use symbolic, representational images to imagine how we might shape this new thing. Metaphor lubricates the mind and frees up the imagination to remove the standard barriers we often encounter to creative thinking and “thinking outside of the box.” In striving to tap into something new that needs to emerge, we are often limited by how we have always done things. The use of metaphor allows us to bypass the typical “old tapes” that can impede our progress toward something new. One of the primary factors we needed to address in that grant-funded study was the shifting reality of our student demographics. Not only were the ecclesial and cultural landscapes changing, but so was the world of higher education. The composition of our student body was beginning to shift toward a majority who were matriculating through our distance education path. A new challenge for how to equip these ministerial leaders through a predominantly online curriculum emerged. Tackling that challenge was no small task and would require all the powers of our collective imagination as a faculty. Hornbacker used the power of metaphor to illustrate the magnitude of the presenting challenge. In the Bethany Seminary grant proposal, she wrote,

At the Henry Ford Museum in Greenfield, Michigan, there is an exhibit of the first passenger trains used in the United States. Those first trains were composed of a series of stagecoaches attached to one another. Transportation was rapidly changing, but old patterns of design were still used.

Our enrollment in the MDiv degree program is shifting from a primarily local population of students to predominantly distance students. The ministry formation sequence is offered in both local and hybrid [a combination of online and onsite] formats. The ministry formation sequence of course work originated before the distance program began, and, like many seminaries, we ask the pedagogical question, how does the Bethany educational ethos shape ministry formation in both our current distance and local MDiv programs? Or have we been stringing together the stagecoaches?



This metaphor speaks to the reality that we often use what we know to transition toward the new. The old ways provide the bridge toward the as yet unknown. But, without the power of imagination, providing an informing image of the new thing, we remain stuck in the past, trying to use stagecoaches instead of designing train cars. The Wabash Center grant-funded study group was composed of four colleagues from Bethany Theological Seminary, and through a long discernment process, we came to call ourselves the Philippians 4 Team. In our work and in our desire to answer our big question, “What does a ‘well-formed minister for the twenty-first century’ look like?” we sought to be guided by the words of Philippians 4: 8–9:

Therefore, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you. (xxx)

What emerged from this study reinforced something that we already knew to be true. This study, undertaken over two years, funded our team of four to travel around the United States to sit with and interview members of forty-one different congregations in the Church of the Brethren. We also interviewed our alums serving in other ministry roles around the country. As we surveyed key ordained and lay leaders, we asked them to respond to several questions revolving around what the qualities and characteristics of the well-formed ministerial leader of the twenty-first century should be. The most often mentioned critical characteristic that emerged from the scores of interviews, primarily from lay leaders, was the importance of the ministerial leader being able to relate well to others. There were several nuances to their responses, but relationship skills were considered paramount when boiled down to the essence.

Now, at first glance, this seems to be rather a statement of the obvious. Of course ministerial leaders must be relationally skilled in their ability to serve well alongside God’s people. And to some degree, this was a response that was not overly surprising in nature. Also named in the many interview sessions as essential skills of leadership to address ministry in this new millennium were technological savvy, the ability to handle change well, and being conversant in this increasingly multicultural society. Intercultural

competency also implies the ability to work well in an interfaith context, partnering with faith leaders from various faith traditions to overcome the many challenges of our modern society.

However, in unpacking the variety of answers, we discovered that relational ability was necessarily the hub around which all the other named critical skills revolved. Even the importance of being technologically skilled had more to do with healthy communication skills than with the ability to run a computer well. It was out of a concern for relationship building that these lay leaders wanted their ministerial leaders to understand the role of technology. Does the use of smartphones and electronic forms of communication enhance community care, or does it create barriers for those who are not technologically sophisticated? How does one use these new tools well so that communities of faith are built up without excluding some populations because they lack technological savvy or because they simply choose not to participate in that form of communication?

The same was applicable for framing intercultural competence and interfaith dialogue abilities. These lay leaders understood the ability to work well with other religious leaders as crucial to building new communities that would address the growing civil unrest manifested in racial and ethnic violence.

The need for ministerial leaders to have a more focused and developed skill set in relating well to others informed the addition of a new learning goal for Bethany's MDiv students. Ministry students would now need to identify how they would address the growing edge of their ability to develop intercultural competency related to their specific context and developmental needs.

This study and the resulting changes to the MDiv curriculum and leadership development process served as the launching point for how I shaped my entrance into a doctor of ministry program. I knew that the work of reimagining how ministerial leadership is formed and shaped was not done and, in some sense, would never cease. I knew that as I was preparing for my emerging leadership role on the faculty at Bethany Seminary, I would need to continue developing a model for ministerial leadership. I knew I would need to put significant energy into revisiting the question of preparing persons to serve in ministry contexts located in this liminal space of the church that is now and the church that has not yet fully emerged.

As my DMin research and writing project began to come into focus, it was clear to me that I wanted to revisit the question originally addressed through the Wabash-funded grant study. What qualities does the well-formed minister of the twenty-first century embody?

In the initial research for this final project, I was responding to a demographic shift in students choosing to attend seminary in the MDiv degree program. At Bethany Theological Seminary, we began to notice that fewer and fewer students entering seminary and choosing the MDiv degree program did so with the expectation or desire

to become congregational pastors. This shift seemed to mirror a more significant and sweeping cultural turn toward a more expansive definition and understanding of ministry. Students were now coming to seminary with what we might traditionally consider a calling to ministry, a definite vocational aspiration to serve in some form of ministry-related career, but with a whole new expanded set of what that could mean in terms of the actual work being pursued. The understanding of what ministry means was beginning to take on a vastly different shape, a much larger silhouette than it used to have. This broader understanding of ministry includes, for example, an intentional bivocational ministry that couples pastoral work in a small congregation with another career such as public education for which the student has prepared in undergraduate studies. This also includes more free-form types of ministries in which the student imagines a calling to form a nonprofit organization that addresses a community need.

I argued in my final research project that three main focal points help explain this development of a more broadly defined and understood concept of ministry. They are the rise of the Nones and Dones, the growing pluralistic phenomenon shaping the broader culture, and the changing form of ministerial identity. As I considered these forces shaping the world around us and the reality before us, I knew that it would be necessary to reimagine the preparation of persons serving in ministerial leadership.

As this reconception began to take shape, I once again relied on the power of metaphor and image to inform and inspire the direction. A new and complex image emerged that would serve to capture the essence of training for ministerial leadership. This unique image would guide the development of the coursework at the seminary for which I was responsible.

This metaphor took the visual form of a double trinity knot (see figure 1). There are many connections to Celtic spirituality associated with the triquetra or trinity knot. One of the apparent connections is its symbolic representation of the Trinity. Multiple lines of relationship and interconnection emerge when we superimpose one trinity knot on another in an inverted orientation. This image works well to describe the numerous intersections, relationships, and layers of meaning involved in ministry. A double trinity knot still has the Trinitarian connection, doubly reinforced, but also begins to resemble the open bloom of a flower.



Figure 1

This graphic was designed during a number of brainstorming sessions involving Professor Tara Hornbacker and Dan Poole. The diagram is a working representation of our continually evolving understanding of the new model of Ministry Formation. My thanks to Dallas Theological Seminary colleague Dipa Hart for her colorful editorial contributions.

If one were to render this two-dimensional image in three dimensions and set the model in motion, it would be reminiscent of the atom. The insertion of motion into the metaphor suggests that ministry is not static but is a very dynamic process in a constant state of flux. This movement is present both in the continually changing circumstances of a ministry setting and in how the ministerial leader is challenged to anticipate and respond with wisdom as the whole is in motion around them. I began to see how the theological underpinnings of the courses taught in the Ministry Formation sequence at Bethany Seminary fit into this shape. When placed strategically within the image, these theological concepts serve as a visual representation of their interplay and intersection in the world of ministry.

The centerpiece is the linchpin of the entire model. The “balanced, reflective practitioner” is the result of how each aspect of ministerial practice and reflection informs the work of the ministerial leader. Jackson Carroll explores the work of “reflective

leadership” and reflexivity in *As One with Authority: Reflective Leadership in Ministry*, which serves as the basis for understanding the balanced, reflective practitioner.<sup>3</sup> Carroll introduces a vital concept for healthy leadership—the work of the ministerial leader practicing “*reflective leadership*.”<sup>4</sup> He defines this as “a kind of intentional style of congregational practice and pastoral leadership that takes account of the reflexivity characteristic of late modern or postmodern life.”<sup>5</sup> Reflexivity, as Carroll uses it, refers to the ministerial leader’s ability to engage in a repeated pattern of action and reflection in ministry. This kind of ministerial leader reflects on the ministry events that occurred that day and puts their actions in conversation with their understanding of theoretical ministry frameworks. The resulting behavior informed by this reflection model should lead the minister to a more informed practice. This continual cycle, Carroll argues, leads to better-informed ministry practice over time.

### THE THREE-FOLD NATURE OF THE NEW IMAGE

The first triad that guides the balanced self-reflective practitioner is a group of three fundamental questions essential to the Ministry Formation educational philosophy (see figure 1). Question one is the theological question, “Where is God in all this?” (WIGIAT?). The second question is the analysis question, “What is really going on here?” (WIRGOH?). The third guiding question of ministerial practice is the discernment question, “What is mine (or ours) to do?” (WIMTOD?). This set of questions, when used collectively, has proven to be extremely helpful for guiding the ministerial leader.

The second triad that guides the ministerial leader helps to bring balance to the leader’s approach to ministry. Thinking, being, and doing are three elements that, when kept in equal parts, allow the ministering person to maintain a holistic approach. Otherwise commonly referred to as head, heart, and hands, this triumvirate can remind the ministering person not to lose sight of the complexity of ministerial practice that requires the whole ministerial leader. Focusing on one or two sides of this triangle leads to imbalanced ministerial practice. Paying attention to each leg of the triangle in equal measure is essential.

Alongside the three elements that bring equilibrium to the balanced, reflective practitioner are three levels of awareness crucial for the ministerial leader. These three elements of awareness are God, self, and one’s context.

As we go deeper into the double trinity knot bloom, we find several corollary elements that derive from the outer “petals.” These intersections reveal a more profound complexity regarding how these different trifold concepts interact. At this level, we find the following elements: social awareness, world awareness, *missio Dei*, intellectual vibrancy, emotional intelligence, and the spiritual disciplines, as defined earlier. It is important to note the vital role that spiritual disciplines serve within the Ministry Formation educational philosophy and practice. Focus upon and practice of the spiritual



disciplines is an essential dimension of the “formation” component of Ministry Formation for students at Bethany Seminary.

The final tripartite element in the double trinity knot bloom consists of three adjectives that serve as the cornerstone of the retooling of the Ministry Formation curriculum: inspirational, incarnational, and improvisational. These three elements are in the smallest sections at the interior of the bloom. Just as electrons are the smallest particles of the atom but are necessary for the atom’s energy and movement, so I argue that inspiration, incarnation, and improvisation are essential for the practice of ministry. These three elements, though tiny in their physical representation, are indispensable to the shaping as well as the practices of ministerial leaders. I consider them to be at the core.

As we look at the final trifold element of the larger image, which helps to illustrate who the balanced, reflective practitioner is, we find that the well-formed ministerial leader is grounded in a practice of ministry that springs forth from inspiration, incarnation, and improvisation. These three elements work together in harmony to equip the ministerial leader, and while each component is unique, they are interdependent in function. Ministry that is inspirational speaks to the dual nature of how ministerial leadership is informed and the way that it helps to shape the community of faith by reflecting that inspiration. Ministry that is incarnationally informed speaks to the nature of that ministry practice located within a specific context and cultural milieu—informed by that setting and practiced through faithful presence. And finally, a ministry that is practiced with improvisational skill speaks to the reality that those who are in positions of ministerial leadership need specific approaches that allow them to meet the ever-changing needs of the ministry context with flexibility. These actions are responsive but not reactive and incorporate knowledge of the ways the story of the context fits within or connects to the metanarrative of the scriptural story.

As I sought to integrate the model and the metaphor into the core of the Ministry Formation coursework, my attention became focused on fleshing out what it means to help our students develop into balanced, reflective practitioners of ministry. This has many ramifications, as you might imagine. One of the more concrete ways this model has become evident can be found in the way in which I invite students to create learning goals. Six learning goals are developed at the start of a student’s first field education experience. The goals serve a self-reflective process that invites the students to consider what growth areas they need to explore to shape themselves toward becoming more balanced, reflective practitioners of ministry.

Each of the six learning goals has both a practical and a theologically grounded element. The practical aspects are present to invite the necessary skill development crucial to ministerial leadership competence. But without the theological grounding, these ministry skill competencies are hollow and do not address the formation of the

whole person for ministerial leadership in a way that is balanced (thinking, being, doing/physical, spiritual, and emotional) and instinctually reflective in nature.

The six learning goals are designed to address developmental processes that reflect the six outer layers shown in figure 1: God-awareness, contextual awareness, self-awareness, thinking, being, and doing. The six goals are:

**Intellectual vibrancy:** the ability to synthesize ideas and integrate new information; to think on one's feet and be able to adapt to situations, context, and unforeseen variables; to demonstrate intellectual creativity and curiosity; what thing do I need to learn?

**Emotional intelligence:** the ability to know oneself and one's strengths and weaknesses; the ability to relate well with others; the ability to navigate difficult emotional situations and connect, empathetically, with others.

**Spiritual disciplines:** healthy life practices related to spiritual development, including prayer, meditation, and engaging with Scripture; the ability to recognize the importance of a balanced approach to life that includes care of physical, emotional, spiritual, and psychological needs for wellness; the ability to demonstrate a healthy balance regarding time spent in work, life, and recreation.

**Social awareness:** the ability to name what is happening in the culture around one's ministry setting; the correlation between what is happening in the neighborhood with the mission of the ministry site; the ways in which neighborhood needs inform the focus of local ministry initiatives.

**Global awareness:** awareness of broader global issues; the ways in which the neighborhood or organization is living in community with others around the world.

**Missional focus (*missio Dei*):** the ability to identify the core issues and areas of need that provide the focus for the ministry; how is the local ministry in alignment with the institution's understanding of God's mission?

As these considerations continue to influence and shape how I imagine persons can best be prepared to lead others in a faithful community and be equipped to help persons make meaning for life and faith, I realize this work will be ongoing. In fact, the next inspiration to reimagine how this process can meet the ever-changing needs of our changing world and faith communities is upon us. Bethany Theological Seminary was fortunate to be one of the seminaries that the Lilly Endowment chose to receive a grant in their newest initiative to address pastoral leadership. The Pathways for Tomorrow initiative is designed to invite theological institutions of higher education to reimagine how they can faithfully prepare ministerial leaders to face the unique and shifting challenges of the twenty-first century. For Bethany Seminary, this provides the opportunity to examine the heart of our MDiv degree program, which the Association of Theological Schools has lauded for more than a decade as the most vital asset in our

curriculum. It feels risky to consider tinkering with the portion of our process that has been so successful in our work of preparing ministerial leaders. But change and the need for the work of reimagination require a certain level of risk if we expect to continue preparing with excellence women and men for ministerial leadership going forward.

Over the next two years, as we examine how we prepare persons for ministerial leadership, we will be guided by the aspirations spelled out in our proposal that resulted in this new Lilly Endowment grant. For us, this means that we will be focusing our creative energies on addressing how we can prepare ministerial leaders who will be able to step into this increasingly polarized and divided world. We are all aware of the rising level of conflict and the increasing maneuvering that repositions people groups into progressively more tribalized expressions of community and connection. Drawing on our legacy as one of the faith traditions within the historic peace church heritage, we believe that we are uniquely positioned to prepare ministerial leaders who can step into this morass of division and find ways to instill a new appreciation for diversity as an asset rather than a force that divides.

This work requires a bold level of imagination on the part of our faculty and staff to envision and implement. And it will require students who possess the gift of imagination as they seek faithfully to prepare for this hard work of healing division and finding creative solutions to growing levels of conflict.

With this accomplished, however, our dependence upon the imaginative forces of creativity will require us to faithfully address what comes next. For we must do our work daily as if we do believe we are co-creators with God, who is forever making all things new.

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<sup>1</sup> John Lennon and Yoko Ono, "Imagine," AZLyrics, <https://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/johnlennon/imagine.html>.

<sup>2</sup> "Imagination Etymology," Etymologeek, <https://etymologeek.com/eng/imagination>, accessed August 2, 2022.

<sup>3</sup> Jackson W. Carroll, *As One with Authority: Reflective Leadership in Ministry*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2011), 9.

<sup>4</sup> Carroll, *As One with Authority*, 118–19.

<sup>5</sup> Carroll, *As One with Authority*, 118–19.