Finding Ourselves at the Margins: The Integration of Self-Care Reflective Work into Contextual Education

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I teach several formation classes at Memphis Theological Seminary. On this day, I was teaching a HyFlex class from 6 p.m. to 8 p.m. Five or six students were in person and another ten or so were on Zoom. There was nothing special or out of the norm about the class. Somehow, our discussion moved into self-care, more specifically Sabbath and what that means for clergy. Both the in-person and virtual students were engaged in sharing their workloads, family life challenges, time management, and all the other things that make observing the Sabbath difficult. When they finished, I let them sit with it for a moment and then I said, "We so often get Sabbath wrong. We think we are made for work and Sabbath is our reward. But we are made for Sabbath so that our work can be more productive. We rest to work, not work to rest."

I went on to explain this using the creation story. God rested and then began to work. We fail to recognize this point because we are socialized and conditioned based on a work-first-reward-second system. You could have heard a pin drop. Their eyes were wide and their mouths open as if I had given them surprising news. They were visibly baffled by my words. One student finally spoke up, saying, "You have no idea how you have shaken my understanding of Sabbath and rest. All this time, I have been working to rest but I couldn't seem to get enough work done to feel good about resting." Sighs and some tears followed.

It became apparent to me that we—and when I say "we" I mean clergy, mentors, pastors, church folk, faith community, family members, the collective we—don't do a good job in forming people who prioritize self-care. This includes theological educators. We do well in forming faith leaders who are competent in biblical exegesis, church history, even preaching. However, we do not form clergy who are competent at caring for themselves.

Formation for ministry has long been a focus of study within theological education. I argue that essential to ministry formation is the development of self-preserving practices that promote renewal and flourishing. Seminary students experience increased self-knowledge and cultural sensitivity when their contextual education requires self-care reflective work. Seminary students find themselves serving in the margins with other human beings. They discover parts of themselves that invite examination and embrace. This revelation leads to intentional ways of showing up for others as well as empathy for the ways others show up within ministry life. It is in the trenches of serving the least of these as well as in the spaces where they find themselves

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as the least of these that seminary students discover themselves and develop compassion for the other. One approach to facilitating the exploration of the self within a specific context is engaging in reflection focused on preserving the self. Formation for ministry is not only about the Bible, theology, and preaching, to name a few; it is also about the humanity of the minister.

Fortunately, a small but robust body of research covers clergy well-being in the United States and the United Kingdom. Most of this research comes from a collaboration of the Duke University Divinity School and the Duke Endowment's Clergy Health Initiative, the Flourishing in Ministry Project at the University of Notre Dame, and the Lilly Endowment's Thriving in Ministry initiative.[1] Much of their work is with clergy post-seminary or without a seminary education altogether. Helping clergy to flourish is an invaluable gift to the faith community. However, there is an opportunity to develop healthy habits, self-awareness, and nonnegotiable self-preserving practices early on. Starting with a flourishing-over-surviving perspective at the beginning of one's seminary journey helps to improve the trajectory of a life in service to others. Furthermore, this approach combats the myths and poor theology students may have learned from watching pastors and other clergypersons in action. Considering the current statistics, being proactive is far more promising than taking the reactive route.

CLERGY MENTAL HEALTH

Mental health concerns are on the rise nationwide. The National Alliance on Mental Illness reports that one in five U.S. adults experience mental illness each year and that 50 percent of all mental illness begins by age fourteen and 75 percent by age 24. Depression and anxiety disorders are estimated to cost the world economy an annual 1 trillion USD in lost productivity.[2] There is a growing concern for the mental health and burnout of caregivers and those considered to be in the helping professions (Adams et al., 2017). Those in the helping disciplines include healthcare workers, social workers, counselors, educators, and clergy.[3]

A study of clergy wholeness that examined occupational distress, social support, mental health, and spiritual wellness among 103 Florida clergy learned that clergy suffering from occupational stress are likely to exhibit signs of depression and that those suffering from depression are likely to exhibit occupational stress. Furthermore, the sample population reported a depression rate of 12.9 percent which was higher than the self-reported rate in 2013, and higher than the 7 percent of 2016.[4] While the sample size was small and does not allow for drawing any general conclusions about Florida clergy or clergy in general, the results are still telling in terms of occupational stress and depression. According to the Barna Group, 38 percent of U.S. pastors had considered quitting full-time ministry. Forty-six percent of these were under 45. In 2016, 85 percent

rated their mental well-being as good or excellent. That number has gone down to 60 percent as of 2021. One in four pastors, not including associate ministers or other staff ministers, struggle with mental illness. In 2022 compared to 2015, pastors feel less energized, more lonely or isolated, less equipped and more mentally and emotionally exhausted. As of October 2021, according to the Barna Group's latest State of the Pastors data, many pastors reported not being well spiritually, physically, emotionally, vocationally, or financially.[5]

To be fair, the data does not indicate the size of the congregations, socioeconomic status, or cultural or ethnic details. However, we can easily infer the challenges pastors and faith leaders face when church demands intersect with race, gender, and class. Furthermore, the data is limited to pastoral leadership within traditional church congregations. Faith leaders, lay leaders, chaplains, and others who call themselves clergy are not included in this data. Thus, we lack details about the pressures of ministry within community spaces like social agencies, shelters, and prisons. However, it is not hard to infer the number of systemic obstacles and socioemotional challenges clergy face when attempting to serve within these marginal spaces.

When we add the struggles caused by the pandemic to the systemic issues, socioeconomic ills, personal and family problems, and normal day-to-day challenges of pastoring and leading people of faith, the result is a cacophony of challenges. It is safe to say that these past few years have been filled with many adjustments, from navigating being sequestered at home, to learning how to build community over Zoom and other video conferencing platforms, to trepidation over vaccinations and booster shots, to reuniting with family the best one can. These few years have been nothing short of challenging. The residue of the trauma and the post-traumatic impact of the pandemic will be with us for many years to come. We know this because we often obsess over Centers for Disease Control reports, World Health Organization research, and news about current and upcoming viral exposure. Concerns about mental health and substance use remain elevated three years after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, with 90 percent of U.S. adults believing that the country is facing a mental health crisis, according to a recent KFF/CNN survey.[6] The pandemic affected the public's mental health and well-being in a variety of ways, including through isolation and loneliness, job loss and financial instability, and illness and grief.

Over the course of the pandemic, many adults reported symptoms consistent with anxiety and depression, with approximately four in ten adults reporting these symptoms by early 2021, which declined to approximately three in ten adults as the pandemic continued. Additionally, drug overdose deaths have sharply increased—largely due to fentanyl—and after a brief period of decline, suicide deaths are once again on the rise. These negative mental health and substance use outcomes have disproportionately affected some populations, particularly communities of color and

youth. History has shown that the mental health impacts of disasters outlast the physical impact, suggesting that today's elevated mental health needs will continue well beyond the coronavirus outbreak itself. As we emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic and the federal public health emergency draws to an end, it will be important to consider how the increased need for mental health and substance use services may persist long-term, even as new cases and deaths due to COVID-19, hopefully, decline.[7]

FORMATION FOR RESILIENCE

Given the lived experience of faith leaders, how do we form ministers who do more than survive ministry? How can we as theological educators humanize ministers so that they recognize they need healthy boundaries and healthy outlets? In what ways can we concretize the need for deeper self-knowledge and intentional spiritual nurturing to avoid clergy burnout and clergy depression? Lastly, how do we teach faith leaders that caring for ourselves gives others permission to care for themselves?

My short answer is that we as theological educators should include self-care and soul care contemplation and dialogue within the theological journey. Make attending to what Parker Palmer calls the "inner work" an essential part of the curriculum. Inner work involves skills like journaling, reflective reading, spiritual friendship, meditation, and prayer. Inner work is a deeply personal matter but not a private matter. It can be done in community.[8] In a thorough study on professional education of clergy sponsored by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, the authors of *Educating Clergy* consider that "the great challenge" for seminaries is to provide the integration between cognitive knowledge and everyday practice. They note further that a normative sense of identity formation must be integrated along with such knowledge and practice.[9] That is to say, clergy identity formation occurs as the seminarian learns and applies knowledge. Considering that we are constantly in a state of learning and practicing, we are also in a constant state of forming. The process is dynamic. This makes "the great challenge" even greater because seminaries are called to be nimble enough to form clergy who are flexible, moldable, and open to (re)forming in ways that make them more effective in ministry.

Theological education must do more than deposit the names, theories, and works of scholars long gone. Students seek practical applications of the information being taught. The days are gone when pastoral ministry was the end goal of seminary. Today, students—at least my students—come to seminary with a fulfilling full-time career, many already with advanced degrees. They are not looking for an MDiv to promote themselves or give them the credentialing needed to apply for a pastoral position. They come to seminary in search of tools to enhance what they already do. Thus, practical application is pivotal. Furthermore, students are looking for theological education to help them do more than survive in ministry. They want to be equipped to live and not

die doing ministry. Matt Bloom, researcher with the Flourishing in Ministry project, writes, "Flourishing happens when ministry is a life-enriching rather than life-depleting experience."[10] As a part of my self-care class, I require students to read "A Pastor's Suicide."[11] I require them to watch a YouTube video of Kirk Byron Jones discussing his book *Rest in the Storm*. My hope is that something in both these stories will resonate with their own experience and that they will become aware of the warning signs of "surviving" ministry. And, I hope that if they are on the verge of dying in ministry, they will finally reach for a lifeline.

Clergy, congregations, and communities suffer when faith leaders do not prioritize self-care. Consequences associated with professional burnout include impaired job dissatisfaction, absenteeism, decreased productivity, reduced organizational commitment, impaired physical health, reduced quality of life, loss of purpose, emotional problems, loneliness, lowered self-esteem, marital conflict, and a substantial loss of closeness and enjoyment in relationships both personally and professionally.[12] Clergy impairment, reduced effectiveness, and attrition have numerous negative effects on clergy themselves, their congregations, and communities.[13] By making self-care and soul care a requirement within contextual education, we humanize the internship experience. We ensure the students prioritize themselves, something we rarely do in ministry. Furthermore, we shift contextual education from the mechanics of doing a job to check something off the list or completing hours for a grade to embodied service learning where the student sees themself as a whole human throughout the process. As a result, students can engage the site supervisor beyond superficial job function inquiries to questions of human flourishing within a specific context. It is in the crucible of experiential learning, practical theology, and self- discovery that seminary students find themselves—the genuine, authentic, fully human selves needed for effective ministry.

FORMATION FOR MINISTRY AND CONTEXTUAL EDUCATION AT MEMPHIS THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

According to the Association of Theological Schools standards of accreditation, theological schools are communities of faith and learning centered on student learning and formation. The Master of Divinity degree is broadly and deeply attentive to the intellectual, human, spiritual, and vocational dimensions of student learning and formation in ways consistent with the school's mission and theological commitments.[14] At best, ministry formation is a specific moving target, always shifting and changing to meet the ever-changing values of the denomination, church, society, theology schools, students, and local community.

I define formation for ministry as an ongoing process of wrestling with and reconciling old and new experiences, information, beliefs, and practices. Our job as

schools of theological education is to create the safe space that welcomes this discomfort. Students enter seminary with diverse academic, relational, religious and spiritual experiences that are foundational to their formation as human beings and as faith leaders. We make several assumptions about students entering seminary: (1) students enter having experienced the good, bad, and the ugly of the church and society, (2) students enter with an internal wrestling they may or may not be able to fully articulate, (3) students enter with truths and myths about God, self, and neighbor, and (4) students enter ready to do the internal work necessary for effective ministry.

If these assumptions hold true, then our job is to develop and grow competent faith leaders who are self-aware, relational persons committed to nurturing their relationships with God, self, and the community; to develop in each person the skills they need to think critically about their experiences and the events of society; and to develop embodied leaders who bring their whole selves (past and present experiences, values, biases, passions, and faith) to the conversation and encourage others to do the same.

At Memphis Theological Seminary, we seek to impact four areas of formation: academic, spiritual, relational, and ministerial. In 2021, we integrated formation throughout the seminary journey. Our students are now required to take a series of three formation classes. The first course, entitled Formation, Spirituality, and Ministry, helps to ground the student in the value of formation. The second course, entitled Formation and Contextual Ministry, exposes the student to ministry work within a faith community or social agency. The last class, Formation and the Practice of Ministry, has as its primary focus the development of core skills and competencies in the areas of preaching, worship, and pastoral leadership within a church setting. Within our Christian ministry degree, Formation and the Practice of Ministry consists of the development, planning, and implementation of a capstone ministry project consistent with the student's concentration or specialization. The full integration of formation within the curriculum is designed to clearly articulate the importance of the students' taking personal responsibility for their formation. In addition, we want to keep before the student this concept of formation so that they are always considering the ways in which their work, reading, reflection, and experiences contribute to how they do theology and ministry.

For the purposes of this article, the second course in the formation series is the most critical. Its course description reads as follows:

> . . . The course will take an integrative approach to formation and supervised ministry by utilizing the experiences of supervised ministry as case studies for dialogue, theological reflection, and critical assessment of one's ministry approach. The primary focus of this course is exposure within a particular ministry context, mentoring and guidance via site

> supervision, and reflection on experiences within one's ministry context. The supervised ministry lab will reflect the context in which the student desires to serve (non-profit or church). Through exposure within a specific ministry context, class dialogue, and personal reflection students will move toward clarity in one's vocational call and an appreciation of the diverse aspects of ministry.

The Formation and Contextual Ministry course employs a multidimensional model for making sense of the ministry experience. (1) Students engage in learning through student-to-student dialogue within a traditional classroom format. Utilizing Mathew Floding's *Engage* and Kirk Byron Jones's *Rest in the Storm*, students engage the material via the flipped classroom model and open dialogue. More specifically to self-care, we take an in-depth look at self-care as self-preservation,[15] clergy burnout/suicide, self-violence, stillness, the Sabbath, and the development of a self-care plan. (2) Chapter content is further reinforced with short research assignments students complete within their ministry context. (3) Students also participate in covenant groups where they focus on formation around the topics of race, gender, class, and sexuality. These three movements along with personal and theological reflection within a ministry or agency setting set the stage for self-discovery and cultural sensitivity in two specific ways: awareness of self as a multidimensional human being and flourishing on purpose.

#1. AWARENESS OF SELF AS A MULTIDIMENSIONAL HUMAN BEING

The integration of self-care reflective work with contextual education experiences facilitates the awareness of oneself as a multidimensional human being. It asserts, "I need to understand myself as more than a job function." The ability to understand oneself as a gendered, racialized, sexualized, and classed human makes real the successes and challenges we may face in service to others. We are able to acknowledge our advantages and disadvantages in society and in our ministry contexts. The following examples concretize this observation.

Standing with My Congregation

One student served her denomination as an administrative intern. She was one of three white women serving as pastors on the local level but not considered for leadership in the regional denominational association. For her, the regional and national level of her denomination is a marginal space, a space where she does not see or experience gender equity. Her denomination was and still is experiencing stark division over issues of gender and sexuality. She said,

> Standing with my congregation and against my denomination based on their beliefs about sexuality thrusts me into the authenticity of my call and what that

> means to me. It made me take a long hard look at what it means to lead God's people; what it means to answer a call that may require that I stand alone.

Further dialogue regarding the challenges facing her denomination revealed that the personal is political.[16] She says,

> It has taught me that gender and sexuality still operate as oppressive forces in the church. My gender enters the door before I speak. Decisions about me have already been made based on my gender. As a cis-gender, heterosexual woman, I could hide behind the privilege it affords me and my family, but I am not called to do that. And because of my call, I may have to leave the denomination I know and love.

"Are You the Chaplain?"

A student serving as a chaplain at a VA hospital attested to the impact of being a racialized being. When visiting a patient, she was questioned regarding her right or credentials for being there. "Are you the chaplain? Can you get somebody else to pray for me? You're black." The student left to get their supervisor. The patient's comment did not discourage the student, but it did provide a wake-up call. The student reflected, In the same way conclusions about me are made before getting to know me, I must guard myself against making those same judgements. I also need to realize that all of us come with baggage. We come with truths, biases, and trauma. Our failure to acknowledge these dimensions of ourselves and our unwillingness to work toward healing cause us to run the risk of having these issues show up in our dealings with other people.

For these seminarians, marginal spaces were nontraditional. They were spaces where the student was at the margins based on their race, gender, or belief system. The students found dimensions of themselves that had always been there but may not have been at the forefront of their thinking. One student recognized how her gender and sexuality opens and closes doors. Another learned that acknowledging and doing healing work around our biases and baggage helps us avoid wounding those we serve. The integration of self-care reflective work with contextual education experiences facilitates the awareness of oneself as a multidimensional human being. At times, things happen to us and for us because of these dimensions, not because of our job function. Thus, students need to understand these dimensions in meaningful ways.

#2. FLOURISHING ON PURPOSE

The integration of self-care reflective work with contextual education experiences reinforces the reality that clergypersons are human beings who need self-care to be effective. It says: I need to prioritize myself by learning to love you without sacrificing me. Intentionally prioritizing oneself gives clergy the agency to make decisions for and

about themselves. Furthermore, it gives others permission to do the same. This point is made clear in the following student observations.

Changing My Pace

One student said, "I am not moving at a sacred pace. I have neglected my devotional routine in favor of ministry work, sermon prep, and Bible study. My morning routine used to slow me down, center me, and give me direction for the day. I am not as effective without it." This student was serving as a full-time pastor, a part-time student, and a student intern at a local social agency that answered crisis calls twenty-four hours a day. He complained of fatigue by the time he got to his ministry site. The immediate needs of the clients became overwhelming and unmanageable because he was exhausted. It was hard for him to be present, to not watch the clock. That same fatigue followed him home and interrupted his family life. After reading Kirk Byron Jones's *Rest in the Storm* chapter entitled "Sacred Pace," he spoke of how his hurried existence was wearing him out and wearing him down in the church and outside the church. For him, serving was about self-sacrifice to the point of exhaustion. With the help of *Rest in the Storm* he was able to resolve, "I am committed to getting back on track. Daily devotion does that for me. I want to give people my best, not my leftovers."

Finally Caring for Me

A student says to me, "Dr. Moore, I don't have a self-care plan. I don't do anything intentionally related to caring for me. That's a terrible admission. I have too much to do." This student was serving as an associate minister in a rural congregation. Her field education experience was with a nearby women's shelter. One of the assignments for my class is the development of a self-care plan that is sustainable. In addition, students are to speak with their site supervisor about the self-care practices they employ to effectively serve in their church or agency. Further dialogue with this student revealed that her site supervisor did not have a self-care plan either. I thought, what an exciting opportunity—to develop a self-care plan together. The supervisor, however, was too busy to do this. The student still was required to try, at the very least. And she did. She sat down with her partner and attempted to develop a strategy that would give her rest. "It was hard and eye-opening. We both need time to decompress. We may not get to all of it, but it's a start," she explained.

These two students were serving within marginal spaces, a local crisis-intervention center and a women's shelter. Their physical, emotional, and spiritual selves needed to be fully present to meet the needs of the clients. Their effectiveness was predicated on their physical, emotional, and spiritual health. For one student, that meant moving from a hurried existence to one of intentional and sacred movement. For the other, it was realizing that she had not been making herself a priority in her life. Her work life was making all of her decisions for her. Furthermore, in their discussion her spouse realized that she required an approach to caring for herself as well. Both of them were suffering individually and collectively. Yet, they felt hope that changing their pace and at least thinking about self-care was a step in a new direction.

The integration of self-care reflective work with contextual education experiences reinforces the reality that clergypersons, like the people we serve, are human beings in need of nurture and care. However, we often sacrifice ourselves to care for others. It is important to help students understand that self-care is less about either-or and more about both-and. Students learn that it is possible to love others without sacrificing the self in the process. They find that ministry and family life can be more enjoyable if they take seriously the nurture of the self. It is not enough just to care for others.

CONCLUSION

My observations during my formation class revealed that clergy, mentors, pastors, church folks, family members, and even theological educators can stand to improve in forming seminarians, ministers in training, and clergy to prioritize self-care. We do well in forming faith leaders who are competent in biblical exegesis, church history, and even preaching. However, we do not form clergy who are competent at caring for themselves. Essential to ministry formation is the development of self-preserving practices that promote renewal and flourishing. Seminary students experience increased self-knowledge and cultural sensitivity when contextual education requires self-care reflective work. Statistics disclose the hard truth that if clergypersons do not do the work of self-care, we will not survive, let alone thrive. Furthermore, self-care reflective work reorients us. It rejects the "superman" or "superwoman" persona by placing our humanity before us. I have made a conscious commitment to discuss an aspect of self-care in every class I teach as it is easier to get in front of an issue than play catch-up later. It is my hope that the seeds I plant fall on fertile ground.

Martin Shaw, Roy Lukman, Linda Wright Simmons, and Ramona Reynolds, "Clergy Wholeness Study: How Occupational Distress, Depression and Social Support Inform the Health of Clergy," *Journal of Pastoral Care and Counseling* 75, no. 1 (2021): 24.

[2] Shaw et al., "Clergy Wholeness Study," 23.

[3] Shaw et al., "Clergy Wholeness Study," 23–24.

[4] Shaw et al., "Clergy Wholeness Study," 30.

[5] Barna Group, "38% of US Pastors Have Thought About Quitting Full-time Ministry in the Past Year, Barna Group, November 16, 2021, https://www.barna.com/research/pastors-well-being/.

[6] Nirmita Panchal, Heather Saunders, Robin Rudowitz , and Cynthia Cox, "The Implications of COVID-19 for Mental Health and Substance Use," KFF, March 20, 2023, https://www.kff.org/coronavirus-covid-19/issue-brief/the-implications-of-covid-19-for-mental-health-and-substance-use/.

[7] Panchal et al., "The Implications of COVID-19."

[8] Parker Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation (*San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 91–92.

[9] Charles Foster, Lisa Dahill, Lawrence Goleman, and Barbara Tolentino, *Educating Clergy: Teaching Practices and Pastoral Imagination (*San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006), 10.

[10] Susan MacAlpine-Gillis, "Flourishing Together: Students, Supervisors and Sites in Field Education," *Reflective Practice: Formation and Supervision in Ministry* 42 (2022): 156.

[11] Darnell Moore, "A Pastor's Suicide: Addressing Mental Health in Black Churches," *Religion Dispatches*, December 12, 2013, https://religiondispatches.org/a-pastors-suicide-addressing-mental-health-in-black-churches/.

[12] Christopher J. Adams and Holly Hough, "Clergy Burnout: A Comparison Study with Other Helping Professions, *Pastoral Psychology* 66, no. 2 (2017): 148, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11089-016-0722-4.

[13] Adams and Hough, "Clergy Burnout," 150.

[14] Association of Theological Schools, *ATS Commission Standards of Accreditation* (adopted June 2020), Standard 4: Master's Degrees, section 4.3, accessed July 11, 2023, https://www.ats.edu/Standards-Of-Accreditation.

[15] The phrase "self- care as self-preservation" is a paraphrase of a quote from Audre Lorde in her 1988 book *A Burst of Light*. Lorde says: "Caring for myself is not self-indulgence. It is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare." Audre Lorde, *A Burst of Light* (Ithaca, NY: Firebrand Books, 1988), 131.

[16] This phrase has an interesting history. Carol Hanisch wrote an article in February 1969 that she titled "Notes from the Second Year: Women's Liberation." Her essay was written during the second wave of the feminist movement in response to a colleague in the movement. The essay was meant to clarify that women's so-called personal problems, as outlined by men and some women in the movement, were political in that these issues were about power relations and inequity within a social structure that benefited men in specific and widespread ways. The editors of a book contained the essay retitled it "The Personal Is Political," thus popularizing the phrase. Carol Hanisch, "The Personal Is Political," September 11, 2023, https://www.carolhanisch.org/CHwritings/PIP.html.