

A Profile in Resiliency: One Student's Growth in a New Neighborhood Engagement Program Daniel Poole¹ and Maggie Elwell²

BETHANY BOLD

Beginning in July 2022, Bethany Theological Seminary received a \$1 million Pathways to Tomorrow grant from the Lilly Endowment. We asked the question, “How can students lead a congregation to become a healthy community—even a ‘beloved community’—in an era of deep ideological, racial, and socio-economic division?” A key piece of developing a robust answer involves paying new and further attention to the work of ministry, understood beyond the traditional pastorate, that will lead our students to step into issues and experiences previously unknown to them. We began imagining a student-centered program of leadership development that focused intensely on issues of race and class. When we think about this issue’s theme of “ministry at the margins,” we feel it describes the inspiration behind the development of this new neighborhood engagement program.

To that end, we created a new experiential initiative for residential students who want a transformational education to put their faith into action to serve and change the world, which we named Bethany BOLD. The program is open to students who are seeking an MDiv degree, an MA degree, or any of the full range of certificates that Bethany Theological Seminary offers. From a previous Lilly grant, the success of which laid the foundation for BOLD, we committed to a promise of no new debt for our students, so students in BOLD receive full-tuition scholarships, free housing, and a living stipend, undergirded by the values of simple living and conscious consumption, while they engage in community service through volunteering. The acronym BOLD means Build, Organize, Love, Dare.

Bethany BOLD

BUILD: To do the personal work needed to grow in capacity as a leader who is a capable adult, taking responsibility for our actions and cultivating self-respect.

ORGANIZE: To make sense of the communities we strive to lead by learning how structures and organizations work, developing a nuanced understanding of race and class.

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LOVE: To fully engage in serving as we live out our faith, joyfully offering our hearts and whole selves in hope of bettering the lives of others.

DARE: To push and question, seeking the courage and grit to see this challenging project through, living into the uncertainty and ambiguity that accompanies difficult tasks, developing the deep resiliency that leaders rely on.

For four to six hours per week during the academic semester, students in BOLD work with underserved and at-risk populations through nonprofit organizations and learn how issues of class and race function within our small Midwestern town of Richmond, Indiana. Richmond is gritty, an old rust-belt town that is full of opportunities to serve others in immediate, impactful ways. In fall 2023, our students volunteered at two nonprofit organizations: Bridges for Life, which is a sit-down dinner on Friday nights for the unhoused, and Townsend Community Center, which is a historically Black organization that runs a variety of community-based programming, where our students provide homework help to neighborhood kids.

Additionally, once a week, according to a set schedule that is designed to provide new-to-them experiences with issues of race and class as well as other kinds of difference, Bethany BOLD students attend a community organization, event, or church. In the fall 2023 semester, among many other events, our White Protestant students attended Mass, a school board meeting, and multiple services at a majority-Black African Methodist Episcopal (AME) church.

An essential piece of the BOLD program is reflecting on these experiences. The students meet on Mondays for an hour to discuss their volunteering and event attendance, and they journal daily in response to a rotating set of prompts that provide opportunities to make connections between their experiential and classroom learning, notice their responses to challenges, and, hopefully, narrate their growth in resilience and understanding across differences. We rely heavily on experiences that stretch our students and expose them to settings and contextual realities that are different from the ones in which they have been shaped and formed. This work requires an intentional process that includes considerable engagement with the action-reflection learning model and frequent debriefing and reflection exercises with the leaders in the program. This approach to teaching our students through engagement with real-world situations and issues hinges on the belief that contextual awareness matters. In order for our students to be effective and faithful ministerial leaders, we expect them to be able to learn how to read what is happening in their community to become as contextually aware as possible.

Another key aspect of BOLD is the focus on resilience. We noticed that our students, both online and residential, seemed to lack a collection of skills and healthy responses that we categorize under that heading. In our discussions about church

leaders' and others' responses to the pandemic and other sources of disagreement and stress in contemporary life, we noticed our observations likewise turning to a lack of resilience. These conversations, coupled with the opportunity to develop a new program, led us to begin thinking about what it meant to ask our students to do "hard things": tasks and experiences that were still within their grasp but that required them to stretch themselves in order to reach beyond their current comfort levels. What would it be like, we wondered, for our students to approach difficulty and challenges with the expectation that it would be difficult but that they were going to continue anyway? We wrote in the BOLD handbook, which our students sign before they begin the program: BOLD cultivates resilience, grit, and determination in students. We expect students to do difficult things. Ongoing conversations about maintaining academic excellence, doing community service well, developing healthy relationships with neighbors and community partners, and regular practices of self-care are integral to BOLD. The purpose of student accommodations is to help students meet BOLD requirements and expectations. Accommodations help support growth. Any accommodations to support our students' success in meeting BOLD requirements and expectations will be discussed with the Director of BOLD and documented in writing, to be signed by the BOLD student.

The work we ask of students is community-oriented and strives to be immersive, which presents them with the challenge of reconstituting their ideas of self and others while participating in contexts of ministry at the margins; for our current students, this means ministry with people of color, people with housing insecurity, and children in both of these people groups. If we think about a seminarian who has little experience of people outside their denomination and rural county, to do the "hard things" of BOLD presents an opportunity to develop awareness of the self and of their home context.

A CASE STUDY

As we evaluate the first semester of the Bethany BOLD program, we turn to the case study of a BOLD student who is in the range of a "traditional" seminarian in several aspects of demographic and personal markers so that we can offer our observations of the benefits and growing edges of the new program in further detail. Upon graduation from college, this young White male student entered seminary, having completed a religious studies degree in preparation for the rigors of graduate-level education at Bethany. Exposure to a wide range of theological concepts and methods of scriptural interpretation in his undergraduate program had taken something of a toll on his beginning faith construct. This period of deconstruction made for a bumpy transition from a moderately conservative home congregation that had been the primary shaping force in his religious understandings. Nevertheless, his confidence and deeply held certainty allowed him to enter seminary with a slightly wounded, but still strong, sense of self. He had been repeatedly told at his home church

and in other arenas that he possessed gifts for ministerial leadership. So, from a relatively young age, he was confident that God was calling him to a life of ministry, and he viewed his entry into seminary as simply one of the necessary steps in the chain of events to complete on his trek toward a life in pastoral ministry and service to the church that he knew and loved.

Upon matriculation to Bethany, he immediately began taking on leadership roles and impressing staff and faculty with his ability to complete extracurricular assignments with sophistication and attention to detail. In his second year of study, he accepted the invitation from a senior faculty member to take on the leadership role of student chapel coordinator. However, as he encountered ideas, practices, and people outside his zone of familiarity, it became increasingly apparent that he was uncomfortable and unpracticed in facing and responding to cultural, ideological, and theological differences. The student reached the mid-point of his seminary education without a willingness to examine the certainty that fueled his confidence and drive to do more for the seminary. In other words, we had not yet impressed upon this student the importance of self-reflective practices. The reluctance to practice self-reflection and to examine his own cultural, ideological, and theological practices and beliefs led to a sense of fragility in this student. As encounters within unfamiliar settings and contexts accentuated the differences that exist among groups and communities, this fragility began to reveal a lack of resiliency. This fragility and lack of resiliency became more pronounced as his level of discomfort rose. The more challenging the circumstances presented, the thinner his ability to stay present and exercise ministerial leadership.

This thinness came to a head in summer 2023, when, shortly after the student had started a unit of clinical pastoral education (CPE) at a nearby state mental health facility, he decided to withdraw. After only two days at the care facility and meeting with the supervisor, the student determined that he was not yet ready to confront some lingering emotions related to an event that had occurred earlier that fall. Despite a very gentle approach by the supervisor and the offer to take a couple of days to think and pray about his decision, the student chose to exit the CPE learning experience immediately. The student was unable to find himself at this point.

As educators and seminary professors, we understand that when a student is not ready to address feelings related to a difficult past experience or faces significant mental health challenges, forcing the process doesn't work. On the other hand, we know that students often need to be pushed because they fear making mistakes, facing something new, or doing something hard. Most of the time, that is what education is. Our role is to encourage and push them. While we believe that the student recognized the cause of his reaction and decision to withdraw, we also think that he was not yet willing to step into the hard work of creating a healthier place of being to take full advantage of the learning that is possible through the CPE experience. This lack of willingness to do the "hard thing" further demonstrated the lack of resiliency that we recognized in this

student, which was also the challenge for him as he entered the requirements of the new Bethany BOLD program.

In the 2023 fall semester, Bethany Seminary launched the BOLD neighborhood engagement program for our residential students, and this student was accepted into its first cohort. He presented himself as eager and willing to follow the program requirements, even suggesting that four to six weekly hours of volunteering was not as rigorous as he had hoped. But then a problem arose: his decision to exit the summer unit of CPE, which had at first appeared to have few ramifications, now meant that he had new requirements upon his time and energy due to participation in the BOLD program as well as his second required field education placement, and suddenly there was insufficient time in his weekly calendar. At this point, as the student realized that an additional year of seminary would be necessary, he began to grasp the costs of not completing the unit of CPE and starting to address his growing edges over the summer. Because of his participation in BOLD, which Bethany Seminary developed to increase our students' leadership and ministerial skills in attending to issues of race and class, the student's discomfort with experiences of unfamiliar and unknown ideas and people became further magnified. His level of discomfort and anxiety grew significantly since he was now required to step foot into several unfamiliar ecclesial and cultural settings, including BOLD excursions to attend a Spanish-language Mass and the worship service of an AME congregation. The BOLD program requirement of volunteering at nonprofit agencies in Richmond also stretched the student. Along with serving sit-down dinners to the unhoused, the student volunteered at a community center that offers after-school care and tutoring services to underprivileged kids. This center, located in a historically African American neighborhood, primarily serves children from low-income and struggling families. The student admitted that he was uncomfortable working with children. Unspoken, and perhaps unrecognized, was his discomfort that arose from working with underprivileged children of color.

Each of these opportunities at Bethany Seminary, from field education placements to the structure of BOLD, is intentionally designed to increase cross-sections of awareness for our students, including awareness of self, contextual awareness, and theological awareness. Much of the design of the MDiv curriculum is predicated upon the development of students' healthy self-reflection habits. BOLD, too, requires frequent discussions and journaling that promote practices of self-evaluation and reflection. These types of exercises are where the student of this case study consistently fell short. Through the first two years at the seminary, he demonstrated superficial reflective practices that lacked self-awareness and a reluctance to be vulnerable enough in order to dig deep to work on his innermost concerns and growing edges. It seemed to us, as theological educators, that the reluctance to practice honest, self-aware reflection lay at the root of this student's lack of resilience.

Near the end of September, four weeks into the fall academic semester as well as the launch of BOLD, two colleagues in the Student Services Department at Bethany approached Maggie in her capacity as the director of BOLD in order to provide information regarding the behavior of this student. The student was expressing distress over specific activities in Bethany BOLD, particularly an upcoming visit to the AME church in Richmond, and he had taken these complaints to a staff member who was not involved in the planning or operations of the program but who was then also expressing distress on behalf of the student. The student had told the staff member that he was being “forced” to attend a church that he was theologically opposed to. As part of his complaint, he claimed that he had spoken to the BOLD staff, including the director, about this and other concerns (he had not). This stress, he said, was making him think about dropping out of the program and possibly moving back home, where he would attend his classes at Bethany online because, without the stipend, free rent, and free tuition that BOLD provides, he would not be able to remain a residential student.

When confronted, the student acknowledged that he had misrepresented what was happening. His behavior was dishonest. He had been manipulating the situation to avoid new and uncomfortable experiences. We held him accountable to face the mistake and its immediate consequences as well as possible long-term implications for his integrity and effectiveness in ministry, and we provided space for him to reflect on and learn from the experience. He remained in the program, and both apologized for his dishonest behavior and attended the AME church service that he had been avoiding. As educators who ask our students to do “hard things” in a program that is designed to increase self- and contextual awareness of issues of race and class through encounters with people at the margins of society’s attention, we hope that they will appropriately handle the difficulties we expect to arise when their concepts are shaken up. This student’s panicky behavior showed us that he needed further guidance to support him in handling his stress so that he could choose more skillful responses. As we wrote in the BOLD handbook, we believe that accommodations are meant to support students in meeting program requirements and students’ personal obligations; we don’t believe that lowering standards, lessening requirements, or ignoring obligations will lead to student success in BOLD, the classroom, or other aspects of life, work, and ministry. We want to help our students grow as resilient, caring adults who can carry out the challenging work of ministry, broadly understood, with grace, awareness, and stick-to-it-iveness.

In the case of this student, we carefully and sensitively shared information across departments to mitigate the possibility of triangulation, which could have been a problem when the student complained to a staff member outside of BOLD. The Student Services Department wrote a memo to document the student’s behaviors, which was signed by the student and shared with the BOLD staff. Multiple accountability

conversations were planned among staff and carried out with the student, who met successively with the director of student development, the BOLD program manager, and the director of BOLD. The main message of each was to express support for the student but to insist on accountability for inappropriate actions. These employees met formally and informally in the following weeks to continue to discuss the student's responses.

While being held accountable for his actions in BOLD, the student was able to maintain a high level of engagement in his classes. Maggie, who is the professor for one of the student's classes, noted that he handled the assignment of leading an hour of class discussion on the topic of Islam in the United States with care towards himself and others, intellectual rigor, and equanimity. She shared the student's accomplishment with the employees who had been engaged in holding the student accountable for his inappropriate behaviors; later she heard back from the student how pleased he was that "good things were being said about me."

More generally, as we thought about continuing to develop skills of resilience in our students, we decided to place more emphasis on pre-teaching the thoughts and feelings that can arise when encountering, or planning to encounter, people and contexts that ask our students to reach towards difference and head towards the margins. Our program manager accompanies BOLD students in their first two weeks of volunteering and continues that accompaniment through drop-ins throughout the semester. The program manager pre-teaches the expectations and norms and leads our students in discussions to unpack their experiences surrounding weekly events such as unfamiliar church services and community meetings that they attend. We employ a cohort model to encourage community building, accountability partnering, and, of course, friendship among BOLD students: in their first semester in the program, our students are completing all of their volunteer hours together, at the same nonprofits during the same hours.

Tellingly, our student asked for more "rigor" from his seminary education while misunderstanding the meaning of the word by confusing "busyness" with "complexity" or "depth." From that example alone, apart from all our other interactions with him, we recognized that concentrating on how things looked, rather than working on how they were underneath the surface, was a growing edge for him. The anxiety that likely led to his acting out seemed to come from a fear of being judged and found wanting by professors and other Bethany employees he looked up to. In response, we affirmed him as he was but continued to explain to him that he was accountable to the requirements of the program and its larger goal of creating more resilient leaders for the church and broader ministry contexts.

A month after the incident, we gave the student the opportunity to write about his growth and learning from the accountability process through adding an individually tailored prompt to his regular BOLD journaling. His thoughtful, lengthy

response reflected his empathetic understanding of the negative impacts of his behavior as well as greater self-awareness. And there were signs of resilience; he was glad to be past the incident and expected he would be able to share his concerns with the people that could address them should a similar situation happen in the future.

This transformation was perhaps most visible at a recent day of volunteering at the historic African American community center mentioned above. This center, where our students in BOLD volunteer each week, was the recipient organization for a seminary-wide volunteer day. All employees were invited to participate in this event to celebrate our new BOLD program and raise the program's visibility among our community partners. Nearly all of Bethany Seminary's employees showed up for this workday to clean up the playground facilities at the community center.

Dan's observations of our student that day were that he seemed buoyed by the turnout of faculty and staff who were present to share in this event. The student happily noted that this was the most Bethany personnel he had seen in one place outside the building. He was nearly radiant and wanted to show off this facility where he was volunteering. Reflecting on his initial reluctance to volunteer at this facility and confronting his unwillingness to work with kids, seeing him practically glow with pride as he showed Dan the lunchroom where he sits with kids to help them with homework and play games, was a confirmation of the transformation that had taken place in him.

As these experiences stretched and challenged our student, his feelings and attitude toward the program began to change. The BOLD program and its required experiences provided a place of safety that allowed him to confront his fears and develop his understanding of self and others more fully, which helped him to address previously held, unexamined biases. As the student was held accountable for fulfilling the program requirements and accompanied along the way as he participated in experiences that were new to him and volunteered in spaces that were unfamiliar, he began to see the humanity in others through developing relationships and becoming known. He addressed his growing edges and fears with new vulnerability through the required reflection exercises and multiple conversations with mentors. This work allowed him to practice self-reflection with greater depth, integrity, and intentionality towards his development as a ministerial leader. While the hard work is not yet complete (is it ever for any of us?), after a semester in BOLD, the student has demonstrated a healthier sense of being open to the process of learning and confronting his needs to grow, embracing the opportunities to be stretched and challenged. He has grown much less dogmatic, demonstrated greater courage in stepping into the unfamiliar, and become more comfortable in naming his doubts and uncertainties without couching those expressions in terms of weakness.

Our sense of this student is that, drawing from the support and accountability extended to him by multiple professors, the BOLD program, and the Student Services Department, he is more able to recognize the facade of certainty that he was previously

employing. As teachers and program directors, our goal is to aid students in seeing, naming, and removing the masks they wear that keep them from self-knowledge and engaging others in the community with their caring, truthful presence. To paraphrase C. S. Lewis, "How can we stand face to face until we have faces?"

Additionally, at a reflection conversation near the close of the first semester of the BOLD program, students' comments focused on the sense of purpose they had gained through their volunteering and experiences in the community spaces of Richmond. They noted that, rather than their initial concern of being over-scheduled, participating in BOLD activities of service and learning that were unlike the classroom gave them more energy and focus. They appreciated the time away from their studies, and they noticed that the time away actually increased their ability to concentrate when they returned to the traditional academic pieces of their seminary education. They also noticed a feeling of safety and well-being, telling us that the accountability and reflective practices of BOLD supported them in feeling that they belonged to a community, both at Bethany and in the town of Richmond. After a semester of volunteering in BOLD, our students told us about going grocery shopping and being greeted by name as neighbors; they saw that their work is needed, noticed, and appreciated in the community.

In expecting our students to do "hard things" that bring them face to face with people and contexts that feel uncomfortable because they are unfamiliar at the beginning of their volunteering and participation, we are asking our students to confront their fears and assumptions about different races, classes, cultures, and faith traditions. These repeated actions present opportunities, over and over, for practicing the skills of resilience. A transformational program like BOLD perhaps first offers students chances to grow simply because a weekly requirement of hours of volunteering and event attendance mandates that students keep showing up to the work they said they would do, week after week. Our role as educators is not only to invite our students to do the difficult work of ministry by paying attention to those on the margins but also to support our students with shared practices of accountability as they do so.

In sum, at Bethany Seminary, the program called BOLD, which was designed to create the conditions to encourage transformation through hard work and reflection exercises, is an early success as we evaluate our case study of this student. This example represents a small unit in a new program, but we see these results as an encouraging process to build on, and we are excited to keep building and supporting our students' growth by asking them to stretch themselves through experiences of ministry and service with those at the margins of society.