

# An Integrative Model of Spiritual Formation: A Work Always in Process

Valerie Lesniak

## *Summary*

*Spiritual formation is increasingly a dimension of ministry preparation. This essay describes the collaborative work of one faculty that engages in teaching and learning among themselves so as to better serve the school's mission and the student community. The formation process of this school is sustained by the tested spiritual wisdom lived by faithful people, enriched by diversity of cultures and faith traditions, and challenged by the cries for justice heard in our times.*

The School of Theology and Ministry (STM) at Seattle University (SU) is situated in the Pacific Northwest, a region known for its natural beauty, its open religious environment and for its pioneering spirit. The Pacific Northwest boasts a high percentage of individuals who have no religious affiliation, yet see themselves as spiritual seekers. Inspired by its unique geographical location and history as a Jesuit institution, the STM at SU offers a distinctive approach to spiritual formation. From its inception to the present, spiritual formation at SU is understood as a work always in process. It is sustained by the tested spiritual wisdom lived by faithful people, enriched by diversity of cultures and faith traditions, and challenged by the cries for justice heard in our times.

## HISTORICAL ROOTS OF SPIRITUAL FORMATION IN SEATTLE

Beginning in 1969, in response to the Second Vatican Council's call for renewal, SU offered a number of programs for religious communities of women and men aimed at recapturing the original vision of those communities. These programs were built on the premise that theological knowledge was not sufficient to meet the challenges of the modern world. Theological

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knowledge grounded in solid pastoral practice and sustained by a conscious commitment to spirituality shaped the curriculum, ethos, and activities of the programs. This approach, commonly referred to as the “three-legged stool,” continues to be a major source of balance and integration.

In 1985, Archbishop Raymond Hunthausen recognized that trained lay leaders with Master of Divinity (MDiv) degrees would be a necessity in order to meet the future spiritual needs of the Seattle diocese. The Archdiocese and SU began a partnership to provide a MDiv degree for religious and other lay ministers. This unique partnership established the Institute of Theological Studies (ITS) within SU. In 1994, the ITS received accreditation the Association of Theological Schools accreditation for all of its degrees—and in 1996, it became a unique professional ecumenical graduate school known as the School of Theology and Ministry (STM) at SU. The Jesuit mission of a faith that does justice and discernment as a way of life infuses the STM with a rich and deep spirituality.

During this same time, Protestant and Catholic ecclesial leaders came together on a regular basis to pray for each other and develop programs which fostered leadership within the various traditions. This ecumenical spirit led to productive conversations between the President of SU and denominational representatives that eventuated in a formal agreement between Protestant denominations and SU. As this remarkable collaborative venture to ministerial education evolved, the STM modified its programs to match their changing student body and their partners’ unique ecclesial formational needs. Each distinctive ecclesial community that has been added to the STM brings differing gifts to the table adding unique spiritual wisdom to the ecumenical mix. The process of partnering with others helped to delineate more clearly the significance of the baptismal call and response as the common ground of formation and ministry as well as the profound role dialogue plays in the transformation of individuals and communities.<sup>1</sup>

#### DESCRIPTION OF THE INTEGRATING FORMATIONAL PROCESS

The formation process of the STM at SU is carefully integrated into each degree program.<sup>2</sup> Course work, extracurricular activities, and denominationally specific requirements all play their part in formation. Integration is viewed as a critical element within the formation process. As one is formed for ministry—lay or ordained—integration becomes the crucible for mixing knowledge with practice. The “three-legged stool” of a) theological knowledge grounded

in b) solid pastoral practice and c) sustained by conscious commitment to spirituality is the foundation of its integrative process of formation. *What makes the STM approach unique is that formation is not isolated to any one specialized discipline or to any select faculty members but is the collaborative work of the whole faculty.* Moreover, the faculty engages in teaching and learning among themselves so as to better serve the school's mission and the student community.

### *Ministerial Formation*

Courses in theology, ministerial skill formation, and spirituality courses provide students with both the *content* and *processes* necessary for individual integration to occur. These courses also articulate the values of STM as necessary for the building of the common good. There is a yearlong sequence of courses entitled "Ministerial and Theological Integration" (MTI) that embodies a communal and ministerial path to integration. In that course:

- students discern internship possibilities, sometimes dictated by the needs of their ecclesial communities, or orchestrated by individual ministerial visions;
- students participate in a three-hour weekly small group class where theological reflection, group process and personal ministerial identity development is explored facilitated by a faculty member; and,
- students develop their own method of theological reflection within a discerning environment in which new visions and unthought-of possibilities for their future ministry may emerge.

Attesting to the transformative quality of this experience, one student remarked that "MTI was one class I highly valued. In fact our small group still talks on Facebook. The learning that happened there was so much heart integration work. MTI helped deepened the personal work I had already done on my own."

For those pursuing the MDiv degree, a second internship sequence follows entitled "Theology of Pastoral Leadership." Building on the MTI experience, this course encourages the student to examine leadership styles and metaphors; theologies of the local church, skills for effecting change, and nurturing staff and volunteers; and to employ processes for social analysis within a congregational setting. A capstone course follows during the final quarter of their program entitled "MDiv Synthesis," which provides each student the opportunity to publicly present their theological/ministerial vision and integration.

Denominational overlays created by each ecclesial body are added to this MDiv course of studies. Our experience has also shown that many MDiv students have coupled their degree program with a post master certificate in spiritual direction or a post master certificate in pastoral counseling. This in-

terdisciplinary fusion is yet another indicator of our understanding of formation as deepening integration and the integrated quality of curriculum design.

Extracurricular components carry a similar vision of integration that taps the demonstrated spiritual wisdom of the ages. The personal involvement and response of each student are necessary ingredients for the process to be transformative. We have found, however, that our students' lives are very complex and demanding. Therefore, extracurricular activities must be realistic, purposeful, and serve the process of integration. Over the years we have streamlined requirements as we recognized that more is not necessarily better. Responsibility rests with students to engage those elements and reflect yearly on them with their faculty advisor. For all our students, the STM is part of a larger reality and that understanding helps faculty members to focus on the part they play in the lives of the student, i.e. the facilitation of the ongoing work of integration. One student put it this way in an exit interview:

I appreciated the emphasis on the formation of the whole person and the opportunities to reflect on that and do the work of integration. It is not just head knowledge; it's experiential and personal. You're challenged in classes to deal with your real issues. That is a healthy thing for ministers to face before they go out and do ministry. A safe place was created where you can discuss these things in a community.

### *Spiritual Formation*

Spiritual formation at the STM at SU permeates the teaching of theology, finessing relational skills, and deepening a person's responsiveness to the Spirit. This process is undergirded by intentional ecumenism, multicultural perspectives, and a faith that does justice.

Opportunities for human and spiritual development occur in diverse small and large community settings so students attend days of reflection, engage in spiritual direction/mentoring, and contribute to the community through the exercise of leadership. The articulated values that frame and guide decisions and policies around the formational elements are the following:

- the Gospel vision of communal life and growth;
- fostering the skills necessary for lifelong learning;
- nurturing a theologically discerning environment;
- the development of culturally sensitive global perspectives and intentional ecumenism, and
- the promotion of leadership for justice.

The role of spiritual direction/mentoring, coupled with advising by the faculty, acts as a critical touchstone for students. Spiritual mentoring fa-

Facilitates on the individual level the wider ongoing process of integration. Spiritual directors are self-selected by the student and any compensation for this service is paid for by the student. The role of mentoring plays a pivotal role in discernment for the students, as they navigate their commitments and deepen their spiritual lives. In traditions that have not had a history with spiritual direction, the notion of mentoring, or companionship, seems to take away the hesitations people may have about this ancient spiritual practice. Once a student embarks on a spiritual direction relationship, they discover the benefits such a commitment makes to their own development. There is flexibility with this requirement, as some students may need individual therapy or others may require a group spiritual direction experience. We presume that each student finds a suitable avenue to share and integrate their journey beyond the mentoring afforded within the school.

Liturgical and worship opportunities sponsored by the school include daily morning prayer in varying formats, a weekly lectionary study group, a student-led centering prayer group, and weekly afternoon worship services reflecting the various traditions of the STM. Timing and participation in these services varies. The commuter and part-time composition of the student body hinders full participation. The classroom is another place where prayer occurs on a consistent basis. The modeling of a pattern of prayer in the life of the school has become more important than a concern about chapel attendance. More recently, the use of blogs and a liturgical web page creates a "virtual praying community" with email notifications sent to those in the community being remembered each day.

#### ADAPTIVE CHANGE: MODELING INTEGRATIVE FORMATION

Adaptive change is the best way to describe the manner in which the formation program has developed. The documents of Vatican II provided the initial theological impetus and vision. Subsequent ecumenical partnering brought deeper dialogues and broadening perspectives to bear on the program design. Institutionally, STM moved from a "renewal program" to an "institute" and then to a "professional graduate school within a university." Even though the student population and faculty membership changed, the integrative and ecumenical vision has remained constant. The STM is now a commuter school with students who are mostly individuals pursuing second and third careers and belonging to multiple communities as they pursue their degree programs. The average age of the students hovers in the mid-forties,

with a predominance of women students. All of these factors contribute to the ongoing collaborative work between faculty and students of reshaping of the program. The critical discerning principle for formation is this: *What is essential and necessary in providing an integrative process for students?*

*The formation requirements are reviewed and fine-tuned regularly through a standing committee of the faculty and student representatives.* Assessments of formation elements are continually under review by both students and faculty. Essentials are kept and reassessed, as needed. For example, the various ecclesial communities desired more interactions with their students so individual Formation Coordinators and Liturgical Consultants from each ecclesial community were appointed to establish ongoing relationships with those studying for ministry. An Associate Dean for Ecumenical and Interreligious Dialogue facilitates these ongoing relationships. Extracurricular requirements are also adapted. For example, a weekend workshop in 'prejudice reduction' was redesigned for the students as a foundational skills course entitled, "Ministry in a Multicultural Context," because the faculty was engaged in its own process of cultural sensitivity training and discerned its critical importance for ministerial formation.

*Even more critically, what undergirds these adaptive changes is the commitment of the faculty to engage in on-going discernment among themselves.* These discernment processes help to maintain the integrity of the program and congruence with our mission despite ongoing accommodations. The ethos that has shaped the formation process has been a faculty willing to undergo continual renewal, adaptation, integrative learning, and transformation themselves. *The formation process belongs to the entire faculty.* The faculty lives in the tensions of the unresolved questions until some consensual response emerges and can be affirmed and owned by the group. This process takes time, prayer, deliberation, and discernment and, in some instances, runs counter to the fast paced, expedient reality demanded of institutions today. The challenge to sustain a theologically discerning environment among the faculty is critical to the integrity of the formation process. It is a reflective practice worthy of preserving as the speed of institutional change increases.

*The work of integration involves the identification, naming, and development of gifts for personal integrity, prophetic leadership, and compassionate ministry.* The process fosters integration of the whole person—who both seeks and discerns God's continuing invitation to relationship and the ongoing encounter with self, with others, and with the Sacred in new contexts. The process of formation is an imprecise endeavor that engages the whole person. Faculty, staff, students, and their peers enter into an ongoing dialogue which, over time, helps

increase students' awareness of their gifts, their call to service, and personal transformation. In the best possible outcome, engagement in the holistic STM formation process assists students to minister out of a deepened personal and social identity, and a strong pastoral integrity that holds in creative tension interiority, a prophetic voice, and leadership for justice. A Unitarian Universalist (UU) student captures the essence of what is hoped for in this process:

I value the way I was welcomed here as a non-Christian. I appreciated the formation. There is something different about Unitarians that come out of STM. I had the opportunity to translate things in order to understand and be understood. It is now a spiritual practice for me. It's brought me closer to my own faith. There wasn't ever a class that I had to think what does this mean for me as a minister. Formation questions permeated all the classes. It wasn't an intellectual exercise. It was a formation. As a UU, I feel incredibly grounded as a minister and I feel ready to serve.

#### CRITICAL ISSUES AHEAD

Over the course of the existence of the STM at SU, challenges have continued to appear that prompted new learning and new configurations to the formation process. Many of the questions that have, throughout its history, spurred adaptations to the formational process are still critical.

- COMMUNITY: How is community developed and sustained in a commuter and distance learning school?
- ECUMENISM: What does it mean to be an ecumenical school housed in a Jesuit Roman Catholic university?
- PRAYER AND WORSHIP: How do we pray and worship together as an ecumenical school honoring the diversity of traditions among us?
- INCLUSION: How do we welcome and create an ethos of hospitality for not only our ecumenical constituencies but for an increasingly diverse student population of no particular faith tradition or non-Christian faith stance?
- INCLUSION: How do we mentor new and younger faculty about the ethos of the integrative model of formation?
- FORMATION: How do we make accessible the inherited spiritual wisdom that shapes our formation process for those without any particular faith tradition? How do we as a faculty and school model patterns of integration and discernment in the way we govern and function as a learning community?
- INTERRELIGIOUS RELATIONSHIPS: How does our ecumenical ethos intentionally embrace interreligious dialogue that honors our history and our constituencies?

- RENEWAL: How do we translate/reformat the core practices of the spiritual tradition to this new generation of spiritual seekers as we add new degree programs?
- SUSTAINABILITY: How can we do more with less as time and resources fluctuate in the school, faculty, and student body?
- ACCESSIBILITY: How do we hold to the core as we develop varying delivery systems (distance learning and on-line courses) to our programs?
- INTEGRATION: How can we revision the formation process to meet these varying modalities, especially in light of our humanistic emphasis in formation?
- LEADERSHIP: How do we create structures of responsibility for our students of varying ages that facilitate what we envision for formation?

Many of these questions are open-ended and have been present throughout the course of the school's sixteen-year history. Some questions are responded to through program development; others are struggled with continually as the school sketches out its future. Distance and on-line learning will demand thoughtful response. We will need to meet the needs of the 'spiritual but not necessarily religious seekers' who both resist and desire purposeful engagement. We will need to create learning environments where interreligious relationships can be nurtured and understood as deepening what it means to be truly ecumenical. Most of all, what we have learned in our sixteen years is that ministerial and spiritual formation is an imprecise endeavor and a work in process—affording opportunities for creativity and imagination and the conspiring work of the Spirit among faculty, staff, and students.

#### NOTES

1. The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) were the first ecclesial community to formally partner with SU in 1996 followed by the Unitarian Universalist Association, The Community of Christ, The American Baptist Church of the Northwest, the United Church of Christ, and the Church of the Brethren. The Evangelical Lutheran Church, the Episcopal Church, the United Methodist, the Presbyterian Church USA followed suit. The African Methodist Episcopal Church has more recently entered into partnership with the school.
2. Our degree programs include Master of Divinity (MDiv), Master of Arts in Transforming Spirituality (MATS), Master of Arts in Relationship and Pastoral Therapy (MARPT), Master of Arts in Transformational Leadership (MATL) and Master of Arts in Pastoral Studies (MAPS), plus several varying post master certificates linked to several of the degree programs. STM has a core MDiv course of studies to which is added denominational overlays created by each ecclesial body in order to meet specific denominational needs.