



Engaging the Dynamics of Pastoral Imagination for Field Education

**Matthew Floding, Sung Hee Chang, Joanne Lindstrom,
David W. Watkins III, Barbara J. Blodgett, Susan E. Fox,
Kimberly L. Clayton, Lucinda Huffaker, Susan L. LeFeber,
and Catherine M. Brall**

A research grant from the Association for Theological Field Education allowed members of our Presbyterian/Reformed Theological Field Educator's Caucus (PRTFE) to engage the dynamics of pastoral imagination (PI) as a learning community in order to equip our supervisors/mentors for cultivating field education environments in which PI is nurtured.

Matthew Floding is director of ministerial formation, Duke Divinity School. Email: mfloding@div.duke.edu.

Sung Hee Chang is director of supervised ministry and assistant professor of Christian education, Union Presbyterian Seminary, Charlotte.

Joanne Lindstrom is Jean and Frank Mohr director of experiential education and field studies, McCormick Theological Seminary.

David W. Watkins III is associate director of experiential education and field studies, McCormick Theological Seminary.

Barbara J. Blodgett is Donald and Lillian Nunnally assistant professor of pastoral leadership, Lexington Theological Seminary.

Susan E. Fox is professor of supervised ministry and director of supervised ministry and vocational planning, Union Presbyterian Seminary, Richmond.

Kimberly L. Clayton is director of contextual education, Columbia Theological Seminary.

Lucinda Huffaker is director of supervised ministries, Yale Divinity School.

Susan L. LeFeber is director of field education and placement, University of Dubuque Theological Seminary.

Catherine M. Brall is director of field education, Pittsburgh Theological Seminary.

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In order to educate ourselves, we gathered in retreat for focused exploration of PI through the writing of Craig Dykstra (*For Life Abundant*), a Carnegie Endowment study (*Educating Clergy*), the research findings of Christian Scharen and Eileen Campbell-Reed of Auburn Theological Seminary (*Learning Pastoral Imagination*), and reflection on our own collective experience. We hoped that collaboratively we would deepen our understanding of PI. The fruit of our reflection would be to create imaginative ways to introduce the concept of PI to our supervisors/mentors to empower them to participate more deeply in the formation of ministerial leaders through field education.¹

We strongly suspected that this engaged process would nurture each field educator's imagination and release it for the enrichment of supervisors/mentors and their students. As an added benefit, we hoped that our time together would renew old bonds of friendship and create fresh ones with our newest colleagues, serving as another important milestone in one another's formation as a community of practice. As educators, we embrace Étienne Wenger's assertion that "learning involves the whole person; it implies not only a relation to social communities—it implies becoming a full participant, a member, a kind of person."²

PROCESS

Ten PRTFE members volunteered for this learning experience. The group was in turn divided into two teams of five, the Chicagoland group led by David Watkins and Joanne Lindstrom and the Atlantic Coast group led by Sung Hee Chang and Matthew Floding. Each designed their own retreat to explore the meaning of PI as Craig Dykstra described it in "*Pastoral and Ecclesial Imagination*," the Carnegie Endowment explored it in *Educating Clergy*, and the Auburn Theological Seminary study documented its meaning for effective pastoral ministry. Both groups framed their process with reference to guiding questions. From this time of reflective engagement, each group then shared the fruit of their retreat with the other. The working groups then pivoted to using this deeper understanding of PI for the purpose of designing learning activities with which to equip our supervisors/mentors for cultivating field education environments in which PI is nurtured.

We grounded our work together in a vision of the Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This loving and generative community provided a pattern for our working relationship. Paul references this union and shared purpose without confusion of identities for the benefit of the Church when he writes in an extended argument to that effect, "Now there are a variety of gifts, but the same Spirit."³ This is precisely what we experienced in our communal effort.

WHAT IS PASTORAL IMAGINATION?

Pastoral imagination (PI) has become a dominant descriptor of a clergy capacity for effective ministerial practice. Since Craig Dykstra began to employ the phrase in 2001,⁴ numerous authors and studies have provided insightful definitions, descriptions, elaborations, and examples.⁵ Perhaps most eloquently concise is Dykstra's 2008 definition: PI is "an individual's capacity for seeing a situation of ministry in all its holy and relational depths, and responding with wise and fitting judgment and action."⁶ In addition, however, it is helpful to include the idea that PI is context specific and integrates multiple kinds of intelligence, knowledge, and experience. It is a way of "inhabiting ministry as a spiritual practice, with God at the center."⁷

PI is fundamental to ministerial leadership because of the complex and shifting nature of ministry, especially given the contemporary challenges to what many consider to be traditional forms of church. As congregations and forms of ministry change, imagination in addition to skill becomes crucial for pastors facing daily ministry encounters and challenges. It enables the adaptive leadership that does not assume mere application of knowledge but relies on learning from each new experience.⁸ PI must be grounded in faithful reflection on lived experience, reflection that draws creatively from Scripture and the tradition and is guided by the Holy Spirit.

As theological field educators, we are necessarily focused in this study on the initial development of PI and ways such development can be fostered while students are preparing for ministry. PI is described as something developed through sustained engagement over the long arc of the practice of ministry.⁹ Furthermore, PI is not directly achieved through one's own effort. Rather, faithful action and reflection amidst complex and sometimes overwhelming circumstances yield the conditions under which ministers open themselves to receive PI as God's gift and nurture its growth. Nevertheless,

even in students' first experiences through field education, we can certainly seek ways to seed their receptivity to and appropriation of that gift.

Studies like those undertaken by the Carnegie Foundation and Auburn Theological Seminary have been invaluable in providing insight into how PI can be fostered in our students.¹⁰ We know, for example, that PI requires integrating various dimensions of the educational experience.¹¹ The Auburn study states, "Learning pastoral imagination can lead to greater integration of complex layers of knowing, a keen perception which sees situations as spaces of God's presence and work, and intuitive judgment regarding fitting responses required in the moment."¹² Also, Daniel Aleshire has written, "Pastoral imagination adds a valuable dimension by suggesting that theological learning needs to be implemented in intelligently creative ways, rather than rationally wooden ways that reflect the learning but not wisdom about its implementation."¹³

In our collective effort, we pondered what theological field educators can do to equip and empower themselves, students, and supervisors/mentors to cultivate conditions that nurture the development of PI. We sought further understanding of how students begin to develop PI through their coursework and field education. And, we wanted to know how we might awaken supervisors/mentors to their own use of PI and then guide them in creating the conditions to midwife their student interns in its maturing.

HOW MIGHT PASTORAL IMAGINATION BE NURTURED IN A FIELD EDUCATION CONTEXT?

Scharen and Campbell-Reed outlined six findings in their study of how PI is nurtured in theological education.

- Learning pastoral imagination happens best in formation for ministry that is integrative, embodied, and relational.
- Learning pastoral imagination centers on integrated teaching that understands and articulates the challenges of the practice of ministry today.
- Learning pastoral imagination requires both the daily practice of ministry over time and critical moments that may arise from crisis or clarity.

- Learning pastoral imagination requires both apprenticeship to a situation and mentors who offer relational wisdom through shared reflection and making sense of a situation.
- Learning pastoral imagination is complicated by the intersection of social and personal forces of injustice.
- Learning pastoral imagination is needed for inhabiting ministry as a spiritual practice, opening up self and community to the presence and power of God.¹⁴

Perhaps not surprisingly, PRTFE field educators recognized these elements as the very hallmarks of what we do. Within the theological curriculum, field education has always been the site of integrated, holistic learning carried out in the context of relationships within community. Field education supervisors/mentors learn to look for, and capitalize on, those moments when students' conceptual paradigms clash with their practice on the ground and new insight into ministry is gained. Students describe field education as the place where previously "floating, disconnected pieces of learning begin to come together and take root in patterns."¹⁵

In one of the examples from the Auburn study, seminarian Eve enters the room of a dying man. A son is worried and concerned about bringing a frail mother and wife into the scene. Eve validated the son's concerns and then proceeded to prepare the mother for entering the room. Moments later, Eve prayed at the bedside. "As she remembers it, the man died just as she said, 'Into your hands we commend his spirit.' 'He died right there.'" Interviewed by Scharen and Campbell-Reed, she reported: "It was a definite growing moment, like, holy cow, this stuff is real!"¹⁶ Eve had taken pastoral care for the dying and theology classes that had explored death. Now in her practice, as she turned from the panic within to the ministerial crisis in front of her, floating, disconnected pieces of learning came together. Her PI was being formed as she practiced and would, if PI theory holds, take root in patterns that would inform her faithful practice.

Another way of expressing it is that, for adult learners, field education is where seminarians bring their whole selves and past experience to bear upon novel situations and where they learn, like apprentices to fine jazz musicians, how to improvise on the fundamental skills of ministry. Field education is where the coping strategies for a lifetime in ministry—with all its difficulties and injustices—are developed. It is often the best time within a

theological degree for students to become vulnerable to themselves, to others, and to God and thus to open to spiritual transformation within a context of safety and exploration.

Being a student in field education is not, of course, the same as being a pastor, so field education can never exactly duplicate the pastoral experience. Students therefore do need certain things built into their internships for PI to be cultivated. The recent presidential election provides fertile ground from which to consider some of what students need. For some, November 9, 2016 ushered in one of the most disorienting days of their lives as certainty gave way to confusion and disappointment. And so they turned to class and peer group conversations where they could raise their questions about the appropriate pastoral response in the days and weeks ahead, given the deep political divide within so many of their ministry settings. Disorientation, ambiguity, and the challenge of reconciliation beckoned them to dissemble their givens, seek deeper self-understanding, and listen for the voice of God during that liminal moment. It was an opportunity to turn the prism of their knowing and discover new ways of being faithful in their world. Such opportunities are what field education excels at providing.

Fortunately for all of us, political drama on the scale of November 9, 2016, is not required for cultivating the attitudes and aptitudes that encourage PI! If students are deeply and attentively engaged in a hospitable field education setting, they will have never-ending opportunities to explore ambiguities and nuances of self and setting. If they start out with well-crafted learning-serving covenants, their ministry goals will move them into unfamiliar and/or challenging territory. Coupled with a proactive supervisor/mentor who provides related legitimate ministry experience, interns can then explore ministry with increasing depth. If they are given room to approach the pastoral role with curiosity and humility, this promotes flexibility to see in new ways and to take appropriate risks.

Key to the success of this model—as for ministry in general—is the intern’s abiding sense of God’s buoyant power and presence. Therefore, the cultivation of PI requires that the supervisor/mentor and student keep a light hand on the wheel, recognizing that they will be called to navigate the realities of the road and not simply follow a solid green line on a Google map application. Attentiveness to the ever-changing constellation of one’s faith, knowledge, experience, and pastoral identity is central to the lifelong journey of PI.

PRTFE field educators at the retreat overwhelmingly confirmed the value of field education for the cultivation of PI. But we also asked ourselves whether there are ways in which our own experience and assumptions about formation for ministry conflict with nurturing PI as Dykstra described it and the power of PI that Scharen and Campbell-Reed identified in their findings. In the end, we affirmed that the capacity called ‘pastoral imagination’ is still recognizable in ministers today. But as various definitions of ‘ministry’ proliferate today and new ones arise, changing what it even means to form someone for it, we wonder whether there is still a “distinctive intelligence” that all pastoral leaders share and that we as educators can work to develop.¹⁷

Our group identified several past givens of seminary formation that we no longer take for granted: a baseline of biblical and religious literacy from which imagination can take flight; the assumption that we are preparing students to lead healthy churches where the deep dialogue with parishioners Dykstra envisioned is possible; standard assumptions regarding the competencies pastors will need; the sustained, undivided time it takes to develop into the pastoral role; and the assurance that doors to the pastoral life will be open for our students once they leave seminary. These and other new realities significantly challenge our ability to let students be slowly and quietly “shaped by the anvil of pastoral work.”¹⁸ It may be that the new ‘pastoral imagination’ is actually a set of meta-imaginative skills that today’s agile ministers need to develop as part of their education.

At the same time, we acknowledge that Dykstra wrote of PI not as a skill to be achieved but an orientation to be received over time. Field education still excels at providing places and making spaces for students to receive that gift. In myriad small but powerful ways, we are constantly orienting them toward becoming new.

A WORD ABOUT THE CONTEXT IN WHICH PASTORAL IMAGINATION IS BEING DEVELOPED

It is important to acknowledge that today, although each agency and congregation is contextually specific and may even be homogenous in nature, the world in which we live is increasingly diverse. Field educators, our supervisors/mentors, and our students need to cultivate PI in order to traverse this cross-cultural world in which there are fewer shared assumptions,

decreased denominational loyalty, more diverse experiences, less opportunity for traditional congregational pastoral leadership, and more students with deep commitments to ministries of justice beyond the local church.

Also, in the past supervisors/mentors could safely assume that their field education student would be a 20-something full-time student. However, the reality is that the student body of our various institutions is ever more diverse. Students range in age from 20-somethings to 60-somethings, often spanning two and three generations in the same class. Students are increasingly part-time, often working full-time jobs, raising children, caring for aging parents, and burdened with significant debt. Students also come with considerable experience in churches and agencies. The nontraditional student is becoming the norm for many seminaries and divinity schools.

The changing world includes the supervisors/mentors with whom we collaborate. They are as diverse as our student bodies. They represent a vast range of ministry configurations: full-time/part-time in a congregation, co-vocational, directors of social service agencies and social justice ministries; 20-somethings and 60-somethings; raising children, caring for aging parents, and themselves bearing the burden of significant debt. As such, many seminaries and divinity schools may no longer have a cadre of veteran supervisors/mentors who provide continuity, wisdom, creativity, and imagination based on experience. This invites us to think anew about how not only to best companion students in their growth, development, and discernment but also how to create relationships and networks with supervisors/mentors that will support the imagination and creativity necessary for twenty-first-century ministers and leaders.

HOW CAN PASTORAL IMAGINATION BE NURTURED IN SUPERVISORS/MENTORS?

We found that reflecting on our best shared practices of training and supporting supervisors/mentors was a helpful place to begin. In prior work with supervisors/mentors, creating learning communities with space set aside for supervisors/mentors to think imaginatively about their work over an extended period of time proved to be fruitful.¹⁹ Creative learning engagements included reflecting on presentations by a choir director on “coaching a voice” or a neo-natal intensive care doctor on “helping a struggling infant thrive” and relating these presentations to the challenges of supervising

and mentoring students. These were energized group sessions! Ministerial leaders discovered more about different facets of mentoring, and in the stories generated among the group they found that they were resourcing each other. Given changes in assumptions about ministerial roles and the sense of isolation that dynamic can create, face-to-face opportunities may actually be increasing in value.

Surveys conducted after the learning community experience found that nearly 83 percent commended this model for improving the practice of supervisors/mentors and 65.5 percent acknowledged that it changed the way that they supervise and mentor students. Although it may be challenging to sustain small group learning communities over long periods of time, gathering learning communities for imaginative learning activities can expand their repertoire and alter their practice.

In other work with supervisors/mentors, we found that equipping them to imagine varieties of approaches to theological reflection with their students was helpful.²⁰ Supervisors/mentors could embrace approaches that fit with their own styles of learning and reflecting but also tailor their reflection time to the learning styles of the student or to an approach particularly suited for that learning moment in ministry. Enriching the theological reflection time also provides for the playful interaction that draws out insights or meanings not previously articulated. In this sense we affirm Michael Polanyi's assumption of tacit knowledge and the idea that "we can know more than we can tell."²¹

Our collective wisdom around training supervisors/mentors new to our field education programs strongly suggests that simply giving information does not equip them, but lively imaginative group work invites and initiates them into this fundamental work of supervising and mentoring that is intentional yet creative and open to Spirit's interruptions and insights.

Our shared conviction is that effective workshops that explore the dimensions of PI will:

- utilize the power of group work,
- be imaginative and release creativity, and
- be ongoing in nature, either in organized small group learning communities or through in-service workshops.

The following are some examples of activities designed to release and to raise awareness of PI among supervisors/mentors. Each of the following could be done in groups of three to five.

1. Build a pastor! Take two large sheets of poster board or butcher paper and provide colored markers. The group’s task is first to draw a newly ordained pastor and attach essential and valuable assets she or he will need in the first three years of ministry. On the second, draw the seasoned veteran and the essential and valuable assets and attributes he or she has acquired over twenty years of pastoral experience. Sense of humor required.
2. Complete the story. Provide thought-provoking but ambiguous pictures of groups of people engaged in unfolding scenarios. One at a time, invite the group members to complete the story their particular picture suggests to them. Imagination definitely required.
3. Provide pictures of these ministry spaces: font, table, pulpit, hospital room, computer/smartphone, and cemetery. Distribute these among the group members and invite them to fill in each of the quadrants on this chart. What (1) thoughts, (2) feelings, (3) actions or doings, and (4) awe, wonder, and God’s presence do they associate with that ministry space? Self-awareness mandatory.²²

THINK	FEEL
DO	WONDER

4. Ask participants to share a ministry story of a time when they
 - a. took a risk (effectiveness is not a required outcome),
 - b. felt overwhelmed but were not overwhelmed.
 - c. experienced a critical moment when they knew their action would have consequences.

How did you grow through that experience? How did you experience God’s presence?

5. Invite supervisors/mentors to explore with their students suggestions from Anna B. Olson’s book, *Claiming Resurrection in the Dying Church: Freedom beyond Survival*. For example, “making space” by cleaning can be an act of preparation for resurrection by separating the valued from the no longer useful.²³ This can be as simple as cleaning out the Sunday school supply closet and getting rid of years of old material that will never be used again or surveying the kitchen and getting rid of piles of plastic grocery bags and china tea sets from

the 1950s. The act of making space is one way to prepare for an in-breaking of the Spirit and actually make room for new beginnings.

“Pilgrimage” is based on Jesus’ moves into various communities, his itinerant life, and his sending of disciples out into the world where people were living. A pilgrimage can be as close as walking through your community, attending to the sights, sounds, smells, and tastes. It could include a mapping exercise. Where are the banks, grocery stores, service agencies, and schools? What are the local pubs, diners, and restaurants? It is an invitation to really know rather than simply assume who our neighbors are.

6. Invite supervisors/mentors to engage in art together. This can be a small project like making a collage based on a Bible verse or theme, making prayer beads, or coloring mandalas. The point is not the product—aiming for a glorious, award-winning piece of art—but rather the process of creating that will open up metaphors, symbols, and possibilities that linear, logical, academic thought will not. An adaptation would be to have one person read a short passage of Scripture, such as a psalm, from several different translations and paraphrases (e.g., *Psalms for Praying: An Invitation to Wholeness* by Nan C. Merrill; *Swallow’s Nest: A Feminine Reading of the Psalms* by Marchiene Vroon Rienstra; *Psalms Now* by Leslie F. Brandt). Read the psalm in the various versions continuously for about twenty minutes. As the psalm is being read, participants create their own mandala using markers, crayons, colored pencils. At the conclusion of the readings, participants share their experience and their mandala.

Making art can make us feel vulnerable, which helps open up a space in which the Spirit can move and spark new ideas and possibilities and leaves us open to others’ insights as well.

7. Invite supervisors/mentors to a forum with a faculty colleague who can engage them in dialogue and reflection about his or her current research projects and implications for ministry.
8. Invite supervisors/mentors to engage in reflection on a ministry question using a resource such as Visual Explorer™ (Center for Creative Leadership) to “explore a complex topic from a variety of perspectives.”²⁴

We commend these ideas and our commitment to nurturing PI in our supervisors/mentors and our students to your pastoral and field educator’s

imagination, trusting in God's "power at work within us [that] is able to accomplish far more than all we can ask or imagine!"²⁵

NOTES

- 1 The pastoral imagination project is explicitly Christian. The field educators contributing to this essay were mindful of ecumenical implications and often discussed them. The group did not engage interfaith implications. We invite persons of other traditions or no faith tradition to imagine with us how to encourage the kind of wisdom and the accompanying imagination that skillful veteran practitioners possess.
- 2 According to Étienne Wenger, learning communities, or communities of practice, are "groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly." Étienne and Beverly Wenger-Trayner, "Introduction to Communities of Practice: A Brief Overview of the Concept and Its Uses," *Wenger-Trayner*, accessed December 13, 2016, <http://etiennewenger.com/theory>.
- 3 1 Corinthians 12:4.
- 4 "The Pastoral Imagination," *Initiatives in Religion* [Lilly Endowment] 9 no. 1 (2001): 1. The phrase appears to have been first coined by James Wall in 1983; however, Wall does not elaborate on clergy practice to the same extent as Dykstra. See "Pastoral Imagination Links Love to Action," *The Christian Century*, 100 no. 28 (Oct. 5, 1983): 867.
- 5 See, for example, Charles R. Foster et al., *Educating Clergy: Teaching Practices and Pastoral Imagination* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005); Craig Dykstra, "Pastoral and Ecclesial Imagination," in *For Life Abundant: Practical Theology, Theological Education, and Christian Ministry*, ed. Dorothy C. Bass and Craig Dykstra (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008); and Christian A. B. Scharen and Eileen R. Campbell-Reed, *Learning Pastoral Imagination: A Five-Year Report On How New Ministers Learn in Practice, Auburn Studies No. 21* (New York: Auburn Theological Seminary, 2016). Most recently, Dorothy C. Bass et al. have extended pastoral imagination as phronesis or practical wisdom, a concept that describes an "intelligence of practice," of which pastoral imagination is a dimension describing its embodiment in pastoral practice. Dorothy C. Bass et al., *Christian Practical Wisdom: What It Is, Why It Matters* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016).
- 6 Craig Dykstra, "Pastoral and Ecclesial Imagination," 41–61.
- 7 Scharen and Campbell-Reed, *Learning Pastoral Imagination*, 17.
- 8 Ronald Heifetz, *Leadership without Easy Answers* (Boston, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).
- 9 Dykstra, "Pastoral and Ecclesial Imagination," 42, 47, 57.
- 10 Foster et al., *Educating Clergy*; Scharen and Campbell-Reed, *Learning Pastoral Imagination*.
- 11 Foster et al., *Educating Clergy*, 24.

- 12 Scharen and Campbell-Reed, *Learning Pastoral Imagination*, 5.
- 13 Daniel O. Aleshire, *Earthen Vessels: Hopeful Reflections on the Work of Theological Schools* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 48.
- 14 Scharen and Campbell-Reed, *Learning Pastoral Imagination*, 14.
- 15 Susan Fox, personal communication.
- 16 Scharen and Campbell-Reed, *Learning Pastoral Imagination*, 15.
- 17 Dykstra, 47.
- 18 Ibid.
- 19 Matthew Floding, Thomas Fuller, Jennie Lee Rodriguez, Lucinda Huffaker, Rhonda Parker, and Allison St. Louis, "The Power of the Learning Community Model for the Development of Supervisor/Mentor," *Reflective Practice*, 35 (2015): 220–43.
- 20 Matthew Floding and Deborah K. Davis, "The Gift of One Hour: Strategies for Reflective Supervision," *Reflective Practice*, 36 (2016): 197–214.
- 21 Michael Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009) 4.
- 22 For example, in a workshop for supervisors/mentors at Duke Divinity School entitled "Leadership Formation and Pastoral Imagination" conducted on November 16, 2016, the pastor who received the picture of a hospital room began, "I was just there . . ." and explored each of the quadrants using a hospital visit he had just done before coming to the training as a case study. Another who was given the picture of a table said "This is what grounds all of my ministry . . ." as she unpacked each of the quadrants' meaning for her when she presides at the table. All participants agreed that processing student experiences by walking through the quadrant exercise could deepen their perception or pastoral imagination of what was actually going on in that experience.
- 23 Anna B. Olson, *Claiming Resurrection in the Dying Church: Freedom Beyond Survival* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016), 27.
- 24 "About Visual Explorer," April 17, 2014, *Leading Effectively* [official blog of the Center for Creative Leadership], accessed December 15, 2016, <http://www.leadingeffectively.com/leadership-explorer/category/visualexplorer/>.
- 25 Ephesians 3:20.