



ATFE Featured Essay

**Report: Forum on Ministerial Formation
in Black Church Traditions**

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The Duke Divinity School Black Alumni Association is a proactive group that provides counsel and support to the Divinity School. Individual members also serve as supervisors/mentors to the next generation of ministerial leaders through field education. The group gathered in Durham, North Carolina, at Peace Missionary Baptist Church, Rev. Dr. Gregory Ceres, pastor, in fall 2017 to discuss a variety of ways to constructively engage the divinity school. This conversation catalyzed the subsequent engagement with field educators described in this article.

On January 25, 2018, the Presbyterian/Reformed Theological Field Educators Caucus (PRTFE) of the Association for Theological Field Education participated in a professional development experience at Duke Divinity School as part of their annual gathering. The forum, titled “Ministerial

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Formation in Black Church Traditions," was designed specifically to inform their work as stewards of ministerial formation through field education for the diverse student populations at each of their schools.¹

The forum was structured in three movements.

1. Naming significant features of ministerial formation in black church traditions.²
2. Luncheon conversation among panelists, field educators, and members of the local Duke Divinity Black Alumni Association.
3. A facilitated question and extended conversation period.³

The highly autobiographical nature of the reporting lent itself to wonderful storytelling and a celebration of mentors and churches but also to describing the challenges of finding appropriate formational experiences while in seminary and sometimes in church. This format, along with the extended time for conversation at the table and in the facilitated question and conversation period, allowed common themes to emerge even though diverse traditions were represented.

CONTEXT AND CULTURE

The institutions represented at the PRTFE gathering are historically white and have clear denominational affiliations. As with most seminaries and divinity schools accredited by the Association for Theological Schools, they have become more diverse denominationally, ethnically, and racially. For example, Duke Divinity School is firmly rooted in its identity as a United Methodist institution. The student population is just shy of 50 percent United Methodist. While Baptist, Anglican/Episcopal, and Presbyterian students are present in strong numbers, students claim over thirty-five denominational and non-denominational identities. Over time, denominational groups with significant numbers have organized as houses of studies (e.g., Baptist House of Studies) to encourage fellowship, support ministerial formation, and provide networking opportunities.

The Black Seminarians Union was organized in conjunction with the Office of Black Church Studies with similar aims in mind, including to advocate generally for fair representation among faculty, staff, and administration. It bears mentioning that Duke University integrated its student population in 1963 when it admitted five black students.

These laudable structures subtly or not so subtly remind everyone of their place within the Divinity School and, in the case of the Black Seminar-ians Union, of white privilege. It should be said that non-majority groups at each of the other PRTFE institutions share similar experiences consistent with their context and their institution's history. White privilege as used here is consistent with Peggy McIntosh's definition of its racial manifestation:

I have come to see white privilege as an invisible package of unearned assets. . . . White privilege is like an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, assurances, tools, maps, guides, codebooks, passports, visas, clothes, compass, emergency gear, and blank checks.⁴

Ironically, white fragility, as Robin DiAngelo has analyzed it, must also be acknowledged. White individuals expect a certain level of racial comfort in their day-to-day lives. Natalie Wigg-Stevenson writes, "This expectation makes even the smallest amount of race-based stress feel catastrophic."⁵ Further,

DiAngelo's data shows that the most common responses to this fragility include paralysis from action by overwhelming guilt; fearful, aggressive, and argumentative behaviors; use of the silent treatment; or, retreat from the situation entirely.⁶

Although DiAngelo is describing individual responses to racial stress, the same could be said of institutional responses, including seminaries and divinity schools.

Given the above, and at this moment in our institutions, our churches, and our nation, ministerial formation in black church traditions seemed to us a timely and particularly important topic to engage as field educators. We offer here our gratitude for the generosity of Duke Divinity School in hosting the event, the support of Dean Elaine Heath, and the alumni of Duke Divinity School that made the forum possible.

AFFIRMATIONS

The panel began by naming significant features of ministerial formation as each had experienced them in their own tradition.⁷ In summarizing and identifying shared themes, these six experiences figured prominently.

- Home as first school of theology
Piety and practice in the home and how the ministry is regarded set a tone within the community. It is often the place where a call is suspected

by supportive adults, who carefully and prayerfully support the child's development.

- **Gifts employed**
The black church takes responsibility for leadership formation. At the same time, it needs to be said that ministerial formation is not homogeneous. In young persons, gifts are identified. Opportunities are made for the practice of these gifts, including Easter declamations, access to the pulpit, speeches for various church and community groups, and teaching Sunday school.
- **Call articulated**
The call is clearly articulated, demonstrated, and affirmed by the community of faith. The actual call to ministry and the faith community's affirmation of one's call is the foundation for ministerial formation in the black church. Pastors and family encourage gifted individuals to articulate their sense of call.
- **Socially engaged**
Eschewing a privatized faith, a young person exploring his or her call is challenged to develop a deep personal faith that is communally shared and socially engaged. The pastor is not only the leader of the local church but is also viewed as the leader of the community at large. The pastor is held accountable by the community and is expected to be engaged socio-economically and politically and in issues that pertain to social justice and equality. Social activism is a prominent part of the pastor's ministry to and on the behalf of the community.
- **Standards upheld**
In the black church, the word 'standards' has a double entendre. Standard bearers—current pastors and pastors who came before them—are held up as exemplars. In addition, persons in preparation have been held to standards by institutions like Virginia Union University, Howard University, Morehouse College, and others that encourage excellence in pastoral service. Learning through emulation is a form of discipleship, and ministry praxis is an integral part of ministerial formation in black church traditions. The mentor/mentee relationship is key to ministerial development. The mentors or commissioning agents in this relationship are deemed "spiritual mothers and/or fathers." The spiritual parent or parents are responsible for the pastor's/minister's continual nurture and development.
- **Deep interrogation and deep integration**
One's call and movement towards ordination is a journey taking place within a community, and the call will be tested. Women and men in preparation for ministry will be called upon to articulate their call with great depth and demonstration of gospel integration in their person and in their practice of ministry. This community, in theory, has the authority and the

responsibility to question the authenticity, preparedness, and character of the ministerial candidate. Validation or rejection typically ensues.

CHALLENGES

Panelists recalled their divinity school experience and identified opportunities to build upon their formation or to encourage meaningful participation in formation for service in their tradition that were neglected or missed.

- **Personal integration**
Acknowledge the racial stress that is the daily experience of many persons of color.
“Discrimination has been shown to increase the risk of stress, depression, the common cold, hypertension, cardiovascular disease, breast cancer, and mortality. These outcomes push us to consider how discrimination becomes what social epidemiologist Nancy Krieger, a leader in the field, terms ‘embodied inequality.’”⁸
The implications of this challenge seminaries and divinity schools to a new level of intentionality. This should include providing social support, training in psychosocial resilience, appropriate spiritual formation opportunities, strong mentor/mentee relationships, and public affirmation of the persons, ministries, and theologies of the traditions from which students of color come, along with having persons of color represented significantly on the faculty, staff, and administration.
- **Equipping for social engagement**
Panelists noted the proactive posture of black church traditions. The church locally and as denominational bodies has stepped into gaps because of educational, political, medical, and other needs in the broader society. Organizing for justice is a hallmark of black church traditions. More attention to innovation and social entrepreneurship is needed.
- **Curricular theological engagement**
Theological reflection and theological translation are necessary for effective and faithful ministries. Panelists noted the need for additional praxis-oriented course offerings that are sensitive to issues of gender, ethnicity, and tradition.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FIELD EDUCATION

Several implications for field education emerged throughout the forum, particularly in the facilitated question and conversation period. Each implication below is followed by an important question.

- Make field education placements within the student's tradition. How might field educators be more proactive in encouraging students to, as one panelist put it, "inhabit a tradition and celebrate it"? Surely field education placements are at the heart of affirming this value. Although ecumenical engagement is valuable, during this critical time of ministerial identity formation and of theological integration and growth in the ministerial arts, placements within one's tradition are paramount.
- Affirm institutional ownership. In what ways can institutions celebrate and affirm the opportunity to participate in the ministerial formation of leaders from diverse backgrounds? One obvious way, the panel observed, is for seminaries and divinity schools to provide mentors within the institution (faculty, staff, and administration) and supervisor-mentors in field education placements. In some cases, providing appropriate field education placements will have financial implications.
- Honor formational stories. Where are the places in the field education program in which to invite storytelling to preserve personal narratives from the various traditions and celebrate the pathways? Naming "whose hand is on you" and other generational or oral traditions honor the person's tradition and the formation with which they come to seminary or divinity school. As one panelist reminded the group, "No one comes *tabula rasa*."
- Make space for questions. What are some ways, whether in peer reflection groups, concurrent courses, or paired course experiences, that field educators can make it clear that contextual and tradition-specific questions, affirmations, and wonderings are welcome?
- Identify and employ the disruptors. What are some strategies and potential collaborations among seminaries and divinity schools to secure field education placements that model contextual social engagement? One panelist named Father Greg Boyle's Homeboy Industries as an example. These kinds of placements can foster creativity and gospel theological engagement through experience in ministry that refuses to decouple Jesus and justice.
- Be generationally informed. How might theological field educators and field education site supervisors/mentors best be equipped to understand and appreciate what has formed different generations? Panelists named understanding and working with generational differences as a deep concern. Nathan Kirkpatrick writes that it is often observed that "churches are one of the last truly intergenerational places in American society."⁹ In addition, how might we equip our students to engage with and learn appreciatively from other generations?

CONCLUSION

Church leadership is always developed contextually, never in a vacuum. Clergy leaders are shaped theologically, rhetorically, and culturally in distinct communities of faith. These communities of faith may not use the language of formation, but they are forming women and men for ministry. The task of field education is to make possible the dance between the formation students receive before they attend seminary and the formation they receive upon matriculation. Each student must begin a dance that will last a lifetime. The black church's traditions of formation, when not excluded from the dance floor, enrich the church's leaders across the divides of culture, gender, and theology.

It also needs to be said that the black church has never been deluded by American propaganda. There has not been liberty. Justice has been both elusive and evasive. Freedom is for some and not others. The black church has both a counterpublic and an alternative theological reality within the milieu of white supremacist America. It has formed leaders and people who love God, each other, and life in an openly hostile environment. The leaders formed by the church, like Jesus in his ministry under brutal Roman oppression, have focused on prophetic, healing ministry that both heralds and inhabits God's inbreaking realm. Will we heed the riches of a tradition that has always understood what many are now just coming to understand—that America is not synonymous with God's reign? Those formed in this tradition bring light to the church and the world.

NOTES

- 1 PRTFE membership is made up of those who identify themselves with the Reformed tradition or serve in institutions that identify with the Reformed tradition. Schools represented included Duke Divinity School, Dubuque University Theological Seminary, Lexington Theological Seminary, Louisville Theological Seminary, McCormick Theological Seminary, Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, Princeton Theological Seminary, Union Presbyterian Seminary—Charlotte, Union Presbyterian Seminary—Richmond, and Wake Forest University School of Divinity.
- 2 The first movement, a panel presentation, was facilitated by Rev. Prince Raney Rivers. Panelists included Rev. Dr. William C. Turner (also a Duke Divinity faculty member), Rev. William H. Lamar IV, Rev. Cheryl D. Moore, Rev. Chalice Overy, Rev. Justin Coleman, and Rev. Dr. Donna Coletrane Battle.
- 3 Rev. Dr. Herbert Reynolds Davis facilitated the question and conversation period.
- 4 Peggy McIntosh, 1988 “White privilege and male privilege: A personal account of coming to see correspondences through work in women’s studies.” Excerpted from Working Paper 189, Wellesley College Center for Research on Women, Wellesley, MA.
- 5 Natalie Wigg-Stevenson, “White, Privileged, Fragile,” *Sojourners* (September-October 2016): 24.
- 6 *Ibid.*
- 7 The forming traditions included African Methodist Episcopal, Baptist, Church of God in Christ, and nondenominational.
- 8 Jason Silverstein, “How Racism Is Bad for Our Bodies,” *The Atlantic* (March 12, 2013), accessed January 28, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2013/03/how-racism-is-bad-for-our-bodies/273911/>.
- 9 Nathan Kirkpatrick, “Engaging Learning across Generations,” in Matthew Floding, ed., *Engage: A Theological Field Education Toolkit* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2017), 105.