

Stumbling into Theological Field Education: Exploring the Move from 'Knowing How' to 'Teaching How'

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INTRODUCTION

For this research project, I collected information on theological field education as shared by a diverse selection of field education directors. The primary research question aimed to surface evidence and experiences related to *how directors perceive their work, the details of their program requirements, and the future needs of the discipline*. In practical terms, how does one go from serving as a minister to teaching others the art of ministry?

When considering vocational options, people rarely find a box to check for “theological field educator,” nor are high school students assigned an essay with the title “If I were a theological field educator.” This vocation becomes an option only after one has been in ministry for some time and has completed the necessary education in ministry. Generally, this means people who are good ministers are hired to train ministers. One problem

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becomes apparent quickly and is worth considering—the ability to do ministry well is a different thing entirely from teaching others to do ministry.

Current research in the field of teaching and learning acknowledge this fact. The Carnegie Foundation supported an excellent, thorough exploration of the teaching aspect of educating clergy. The guiding question of the Educating Clergy project was “How do seminaries prepare students for their roles and responsibilities as clergy?”¹ The emphasis was on the institution and what was being taught to students. More recently, Scharen and Campbell-Reed picked up this work and reversed the focus to explore what and how students learned. Building on the foundational Educating Clergy study, the Learning Pastoral Imagination project desires to “pay attention to how clergy learn by doing” through practice in ministry over time.² So, the research focus of each study is different, with the first focusing on teaching and by viewing the institution and the follow-up focusing on learning and by examining the students.

Certainly, each study offers insight for both teaching and learning. For example, the Learning Pastoral Imagination project traces the learning of fifty student-ministers from ten institutions in a longitudinal study that is ongoing. Although student learning is the focus, one of the early implications is the need to “cultivate teachers who know the game of ministry.”³ So, each study locates a particular view of forming people for ministry, whether teaching or learning, yet is also concerned with the whole enterprise.

My motivation for this study was my curiosity about how directors navigate the transition from ‘doing ministry’ to ‘training ministers’ without equating the two vocations. My assumption is that success in the vocation of ministry looks different from success in preparing ministers. Further, it seems that pressing together the two vocations may actually perpetuate a separation between the academics of ministry and the practice of ministry by assuming an application approach.

Shulman’s work seems to have influenced those involved in the Carnegie study because they attempted to find a Shulman-like “signature pedagogy” for clergy education that, in their estimation, did not manifest itself.⁴ No deeper, pervasive pedagogy could be articulated. Instead, they offer observations of “shared intentions for student learning,” which included developing facility in interpretation (texts, people, circumstances), dispositions and habits, awareness of contexts, and performance of clergy acting and

thinking.⁵ In other words, the desired outcomes for student learning were similar, but the pedagogy varied.

My motivations are closer to those of Shulman, who was interested in the move from doing to teaching about doing. The connection he makes to Aristotle helps frame this well:

Aristotle judged that teaching was the highest form of understanding, that no test of human understanding was more demanding than the test of whether you could take something you thought you knew and teach it to someone else.⁶

This challenge of seeking an enriched understanding that can be transferred to others is what I wanted to explore with those who were already in the field. This meant identifying and meeting other directors, exploring their specific programs, identifying the influence of their tradition or institution on the process, and, more personally, exploring how they navigated this shift from success in action to success in the instruction of others.

APPROACH

This ethnographic study of theological field educators began in the fall of 2012, after I was hired as director of contextual education and as a tenure-track professor of practical theology. I had served in full-time ministry for over fourteen years and had completed a doctorate. So, this was a natural move for a preacher's kid turned preacher. My entire life had been in ministry, but I now trained ministers in an academic setting. So, my first response on the job was to learn the intention of the program by listening to others within the system explain how things work. Pierre Bourdieu⁷ might explain over coffee that I was learning the rules of the game (the field) and becoming more aware of the way people were playing the game (the habitus). In other words, I did not assume that the game of ministry was the same as the game of teaching ministers. I wanted to learn how those within the program of minister formation would explain its rules and define its boundaries.

The formal methodology of my study consisted of a ten-question interview in each director's own context. I solicited a diverse section of directors of contextual education in major cities, yet I began with neither a target number of seminaries nor a formula for achieving diverse representation. The simple intent was to interview (a) schools outside of my geographical region, (b) people unfamiliar with me, and (c) schools beyond the tradi-

tion of my employer, which is a Protestant Christian institution historically connected to the Stone-Campbell Movement of Churches of Christ. This breadth and diversity helps provide a clearer contrast to my own experience and familiar context.

Within these general parameters, the ten-question interview was conversational and informal. Admittedly, my motivations were to introduce myself to other directors and to pursue information and understanding that might enhance my work as director of contextual education at Abilene Christian University. My insider position as a minister and professor as well as my desire to improve my own work certainly affected the communication of these results. In most ways, I was a complete stranger to the interviewees (denomination, school, region, and relationship), yet we shared common work. Each person was made aware of the research intentions of my work, and all were eager to converse about the positives and the negatives of our shared work. My colleague status provided access as well as an environment of comfort to speak openly as insiders of the discipline.

INTERVIEWS

The questions were written to explore the basic structure of the field education program, the field education directors' perceptions of their programs, and their own motivation and life experience that brought them to this career. In preparation, I interviewed every faculty member in my own institution as well as current students and recent graduates. This helped narrow the questions to what was of most relevance to this study.

- Q1. What is required for contextual education and practical ministry?
- Q2. What is the field education requirement at your school?
- Q3. What information do you communicate for orientation?
- Q4. What does mentoring/discipleship look like for your students?
- Q5. What is the connection/relationship of academics and practicing ministers?
- Q6. What works well in your school's program?
- Q7. What are the growing edges of your school's program?
- Q8. What does practical theology need to attend to in coming years?
- Q9. What keeps you going in field or contextual education?
- Q10. How did you learn to be a minister and to do ministry?

FINDINGS

This research began with the need to better understand the work of theological field education. Specifically, I explored how each director approached their work, their program requirements, and the future needs of the discipline. The remainder of this article explores the interviewees' backgrounds, a brief summary of the themes of their responses, and implications for the discipline.

Contacting strangers and asking to schedule a meeting with them can make one feel like a nervous salesperson waiting at the door, uncertain of the response. Without exception, everyone I contacted accepted the invitation to meet and be interviewed. From the fall of 2012 to the fall of 2016, I spoke with twelve people directing students in formal seminary contexts from Los Angeles to New York. They came from Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox traditions, and none were from my denomination. All were directors of field education with the exception of one respondent, who led a ministry that oversaw students from more than three seminaries in a metropolitan ministry center. Our conversations were cordial and informative, and they often involved sharing a meal.

No two programs were alike; each one differed at the surface level in form, terminology, and execution. However, looking past exterior variances, the essential structure had similarities (Q1). For example, the overwhelming majority of these programs required four or more courses related to contextual education or practical ministry. The subject matter and means of accomplishing these courses varied from a more academic to a seminar style and from a structured set of courses to selections of elective courses.

Variations in implementation seemed related to the type of institution and its history, tradition, and values. For example, larger seminaries offered more electives than smaller institutions. Perhaps this could be attributed to the larger faculty and more resources found in a larger institution. The high church institutions had more structured courses and a set degree path compared to the Protestant or evangelical groups, which provided optional paths and more elective course selections. However, the requirement of four credit courses related to ministry was the standard among this selection of institutions.

Next (Q2), the requirement for internship (or field work) was standard, with two (or more) internships lasting a sum total of one year (or more). Each school's approach to offering and securing internships differed wide-

ly. Some institutions assigned students to locations in a set denomination or in established contexts, whereas other institutions allowed the church or organization to choose students. Still others encouraged student-selected contexts. In some settings, these internships were separate, individualized experiences spread over multiple contexts rather than a sustained internship in one place. The institutions differed in what they valued in these fieldwork situations. Some required students to experience a few different settings (church, mission, hospital, etc.); others tracked specific ministry practices (teaching, administration, meetings, preaching, etc.); others were moving to requiring CPE units as field education; and others required sustained ministry practice over the duration of their studies. Another way to categorize these requirements could be based on whether they concentrated on providing skills in practices of ministry, experience in one ministry context, or exposure to multiple ministry settings. Again, these variations seem related to denominational affiliation, specific ordination requirements, or the historic practice of the institution. As an example, an Orthodox seminary delayed internship service until late in the program, after seminarians were ordained as deacons. Many provided the internship in a student's second year. Methodist seminaries relied on endowments and partnerships established within a selected area of Methodist congregations that were available to students throughout their degree program. However, in spite of these variations, a one year (or more) commitment to ministry practice is the minimum standard.

Some of my specific interview questions related to elements of the program of special interest to me (such as mentoring or other elements; Q4, Q3, Q5). Responses to these questions yielded more miscellaneous answers. Various schools offered assorted projects related to the students' ministry contexts, held weekly reflection groups, and required products from the students. These elements were specific to each school and were not uniform. In this cluster of responses, it is clear that most schools had practices, reflection groups, and assignments located beyond traditional academic course work.

Faculty mentoring was of particular interest to me. None of the schools had a faculty mentoring program for residential students, which was surprising to me only because this is part of the residential experience at my school. Instead, three of the interviewees considered the field supervisors or reflection groups as fulfilling the need for student mentoring. Of this group, two directors mentioned their one-on-one conversational interviews with

students at the front (and/or end) of the program as providing a mentoring opportunity to students.

Summarizing the general program features is straightforward: at least four courses in ministry, one or more years of ministry practice, and a varying array of projects, papers, and reflection groups to develop students' reflective process beyond the classroom.

The next cluster of questions (Q6, Q7, Q8) allowed the director to share how they perceived the function of their own program and what the discipline of practical theology should attend to in coming years. The two questions about perceived function (what is working well and what are the growing edges of your program) yielded responses from directors that were specific to that individual or to that institution's program. These subjective perspectives did not raise trends or themes but functioned as their perceived best practices. The identified successes or needed improvements varied widely and were person- or context-specific. Nevertheless, these open-ended questions gave directors the freedom to express what they did and did not like about their program.

Although the answers about program function did not help provide themes or trends among the institutions, asking these questions serendipitously did help prepare the directors to openly address a broad question of the discipline: "What does practical theology need to attend to in coming years?" Addressing the mystery of the future is a regular practice that is often considered historically, pedagogically, or contextually.⁸ When directors addressed the discipline, two themes did emerge. First, many quickly identified distance education. Students' need for flexible online learning coupled with declining student enrollment numbers seem to be a nearly universal pressure on seminaries. Furthermore, directors related their struggles to make online education work by shifting to offer residential courses through online platforms or even finding ways to offer entire degrees in an online format. Distance education was a common interest that is gaining attention and, as several stated, is not going away.

Second, respondents affirmed the need to focus on the relationship between church and seminary. Directors noted that this need is manifest in declining denominations. The downward trends in church attendance and seminary enrollment are requiring seminaries to consider how best to provide nurture and support to churches. Additionally, as institutions deal with more diverse student populations, seminaries wrestle with how to maintain

contact with churches. In other words, current students' backgrounds and interests differ from the historic institutional allegiances. Some Protestant directors mentioned that more churches are now attempting to train their own ministers internally. While directors did not seem to perceive this as a move of distrust on the part of churches, it does indicate a shift toward efficiency and control. If seminaries are to serve churches, then that relationship needs to be better established.

The final category deals with the cluster of three questions on how the discipline of practical theology relates to other theological disciplines. These interview questions were not grouped intentionally at the outset of the research, but the responses drew them together as a natural cluster. These three questions explore the relationship between academic and ministry faculty, what sustains the director in this vocation, and how the directors prepared for ministry (Q5, Q9, Q10).

The relationship between various theological disciplines is of interest due to the directors' inconsistent experiences and responses. For example, some described the relationship between theological disciplines as "somewhat separated," "at times strained," and "something of a separation." One director mentioned that "academics take priority (always) because that is why we were founded." However, several others stated that formation for ministry was the reason their institution was founded. Still others said the focus was equally upon both formation and academics. One institution was described as involving all faculty in the contextual education process. While there seems to be a difference between formation and academics, the respondent's desire and the practice show the partnership of these ventures.

The working relationship between those trained as ministers and those trained as academics seems cordial. In some institutions, title designations separate these roles. A person working in field education may be called "staff" or possibly "clinical faculty," without the option for tenure. Some directors with a terminal degree were considered something other than faculty. In no situation did directors complain; rather, they simply described their institutional particulars. On the whole, it seems that the directors felt supported and believed that their institution worked for the integration of academic and ministry interests.

The question about what keeps directors going received a nearly unanimous response; the students were the clear motivating factor. Despite difficulties, feelings of being overlooked, or growth areas in their programs,

these directors saw themselves as ministering to, learning from, and preparing ministry students. Most quickly and joyfully related stories of the ways students are excelling in learning, in new expressions of ministry, and as graduates succeeding in their field.

Finally, I asked these people who formally prepare ministers how they themselves had prepared for ministry, which was the third and final question from this cluster. Some mentioned mentors by name, identified churches, shared specific ministry context, or related seminary experience. One respondent honestly said, "I don't think I did learn to do ministry," implying they continue to learn how to minister. Without prompting, this ministry preparation question often led to a description of their current role. A widely held refrain was that directors "stumbled into" or "fell into" this job. It was not their plan, but the seminary tapped them after their successful ministry outside the academy in church. Often people returned to serve the seminary that had trained them. In several conversations, the discussion focused on how people learn through action to gain experience. These professionals connect their own vocational experience and preparation for ministry as the training necessary to help others through a similar journey of learning through experience.

Several respondents made statements that again connected with their present vocation. For example, one remarked, "I took a job and turned it into a vocation." Another director described their role as "facilitating the space" for learning, adding that the best thing we can do is "teach people to read their context." She went on to provide a metaphor: "I see myself as the one securing their airfare to another place." In other words, field education professors and directors create the space and environment for others to take flight on their own journey of learning to practice ministry in new contexts.

IMPLICATIONS

The intent of this study was to generate knowledge on how professors and directors field education do their work. This study surfaces implications for consideration and exploration. I offer the following four implications for others in theological education and ministry to consider.

First, this process indeed generated knowledge by providing the perspectives of a diverse group of field education directors and professors. The summary findings provide a reference point for comparison to other pro-

grams. This knowledge may promote greater awareness of the *habitus* theological educators share and foster imagination of ways we may improve in relation to this reference point. Perhaps a group of theological educators could collaborate to develop a future study to explore a comprehensive look at how field education contributes to effectiveness in ministry.⁹ The design of such a study could begin as a collaborative determination of the aspects that should be investigated and then continue as a joint venture of data collection. Additionally, it may be helpful to explore how field education serves as training that bridges students to ministry in ways that parallel in reverse how leaders in this discipline bridge from ministry to the academy. In other words, the transition that ministers make from the church to train new ministers in the academy might provide knowledge for the student transition from their academic experience to fulltime practice of ministry.

Second, this direct approach of listening to others is a worthy practice for a new educator. Listening to other people in your school, including faculty, current students, and alumni, is an important task that helps professors of ministry grow in their understanding and practice. Those who talk for a living may forget the need to listen. My approach might inspire others who are similarly curious about how to begin their work in a field into which they may have stumbled. This study marks only the basic edges of the path of our common work in theological field education through the practice of listening.

I have found that this listening approach is itself the primary implication. There is value in approaching one's job with a research mentality to expanding one's field of view. For directors, this means being willing to critically examine and assess our own programs beyond the typical accreditation visits. Listening opens one to scrutiny. Directors might listen to other directors, to their students, and even to other faculty.¹⁰ This approach may help renew the work of those who have served for many years or may inform those only beginning their work. Listening to students can recalibrate us to a key aspect of practical theology—paying deep and sustained attention to our context. Similar to the ways professors seek to get students out of their individualized or fixed understandings and into an environment of listening to their context, faculty provide an important gift through regular theological reflection about the work of education. I am thankful for the opportunity to listen and learn about field education as well as to ben-

efit from the relationship and partnership in this important work with colleagues across the globe.

The third implication is the need to explore the recognizable differences between Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant seminaries. One aspect to consider is the effects of a more fixed approach to ministry formation (set courses) versus a more elective and eclectic approach on the preparation of ministers. This potential inquiry arises from the findings mentioned earlier. Another way of thinking about this is how the historic leanings of Catholics, Orthodox, and Protestants differ in their approaches to the task of forming ministers. Even though much of the externals or modes or pedagogies seem the same, their natural tendencies vary and are hidden.

Protestants try to carve a niche by fixing what is broken or innovating something for contemporary times. The drive to reform and revise and “protest” is applied to almost anything we do. So, this can mean connecting students to skills, resources, and innovative ideas that borrow from social sciences and business. The Protestant emphasis leans toward pragmatic questions. Catholic and Orthodox seminaries do this “borrowing” too, but it is less of a first impulse for them. Again, I speak as an observer. Catholics have more of a preserving and conserving tradition. Movement comes, but it is with respect to tradition and process and leadership. Also, the more liturgical traditions have faculty who are active in and lead the daily liturgy. Faculty in Protestant seminaries are also involved in and lead worship, but it is less frequent and less common. Perhaps the place of worship and the seminary serving as a worshiping community should be explored for their effects on the preparation of ministers. These two reflections regarding structure and worship are not meant to build restrictive boxes for Catholic, Orthodox, or Protestant approaches, yet the contours of each tradition may provide opportunities for learning from one another.

A final striking consideration is the important ‘linking’ aspect of theological field education. Even though the connection between seminary and the work of ministry is an assumed outcome of theological education, these groups must again revisit this relationship. The important task of bringing school and church together needs a champion. Consideration should be given to the places that churches and organizations can connect with academic ministerial formation in schools. Theological faculty might function as the link drawing seminaries and churches together around a common purpose. Distance education may serve as a bridge to new students in unreached set-

tings or even connect church leaders with faculty and students. In today's technologically connected although physically disconnected world, theological educators could lead the way in modeling the value of relationship. It is all too easy to use students for our own institutional ends, but focusing on the highest good and development of student ministers must be the primary concern. When students are treated as a priority, faculty can tell and connect the stories of students and ministers. This linking approach is one way that theological faculty may keep the good of the church as a primary motivator for the work of the university.

A different way to state this implication is to discover the value of concentrating on people and process. Often people become mere units in higher education rather than humans we journey with. Our product is to help students grow in Christlikeness as ministers. They will in turn assist others in becoming Christlike. This is an ongoing relationship in which alumni and seminary faculty maintain an interactive relationship of learning, support, and service to the mission of God.

I hope that these four summary implications will prompt future research and conversation by providing a point of comparison, suggesting a listening approach, and prompting deeper relationships between constituent groups in theological education for ministry. While we may know that "the academy is not the church," there is a need to give greater listening attention and resources to the transition from ministry to teaching about ministry. Success in 'knowing how' to do ministry does not directly mean success in 'teaching how' ministers serve. The wisdom and resources of people who have traveled this path are worthy of our attentive listening.

NOTES

- 1 Charles R. Foster, Lisa E. Dahill, Lawrence A. Golemon, and Barbara Wang Tolentino, *Educating Clergy: Teaching Practices and Pastoral Imagination* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006), 12.
- 2 Christian Scharen, Eileen R. Campbell-Reed, "Learning Pastoral Imagination: A Five-Year Report On How New Ministers Learn in Practice," *Auburn Studies* [Auburn Theological Seminary] 21 (Winter 2016).
- 3 Scharen and Campbell-Reed, "Learning Pastoral Imagination," 51.
- 4 Foster et al., "Educating Clergy," 32–34.
- 5 Foster et al., "Educating Clergy," 32–34.
- 6 Lee S. Shulman "Aristotle Had It Right: On Knowledge and Pedagogy," in *The Wisdom of Practice: Essays on Teaching, Learning, and Learning to Teach* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004), 401.
- 7 Bourdieu was a French anthropologist who developed a theory of practice. See Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).
- 8 See, for example, Justo L. González's recent work that makes his lifetime of study accessible: *The History of Theological Education* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2015). Also consider the above-mentioned research by the Carnegie Foundation and Auburn Theological Seminary.
- 9 The project described in this article has led to a current research project I am conducting on expectations for effective ministry held by professors, ministers, church leaders, and church members.