Ministry and Formation through Multiple Pandemics: How a Clergyperson Ministers in Higher Education

Mark Chung Hearn

Multiple Pandemics

The change came so fast. Many of us in the academy and higher education, as in other fields, had little space to breathe and make sense of all the disruptions. It was February, near the end of the winter quarter, when faculty of Seattle University were notified by administration that we were to move classes fully online for the remaining two weeks due to the coronavirus pandemic that had exploded throughout the world and was beginning to do the same here in the United States. Our state, Washington, was the first to verify a known U.S. case of a carrier of the virus. There was panic, and justifiably so, around this deadly strain that continues to take its toll on many lives. But this pandemic was not the only one our country and world would face.

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Another pandemic came to a head on May 25, 2020, when a police officer pinned George Floyd to the ground by kneeling on his chest and throat for eight minutes and forty-six seconds, leading to his eventual death. Floyd's killing and the ensuing civil protests brought to public awareness a second pandemic: the unnecessary killing and brutality of Black and Brown lives. For Black and Brown individuals and communities, this pandemic has always existed; only now are others, en masse, coming to this awareness and conclusion.[1] George Floyd's name will be long remembered, as will the names of Rayshard Brooks, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, Charleena Lyles, Philando Castile, Susie Jackson, Daniel Simmons, Ethel Lance, Freddie Gray, Tamir Rice, Rekia Boyd, and Trayvon Martin, among too many others.[2] The devastation of this widespread pandemic was brought to public witness perhaps for the first time in the twentieth century in the form of an open casket of a young Emmett Till, whose mother consciously decided to lay bare the truth of the brutal murder her son had endured in 1955 rather than cover up the pain of losing her son.[3]

The word *pandemic*, derived from the Greek *pan* meaning "all" and *demos* meaning "people" or "village," is an appropriate and accurate term for these two public crises. Both have stretched far into our global village and citizenry.[4] A third pandemic, the loss of employment, is quickly taking its place alongside the other two, propelling many into the same financial instability others have felt for years.

Amid all this chaos and eruption of everything I and others know to be normal remain two interrelated calls: my responsibility to shape learners and my vocation to minister to people with a life-giving response. How am I, and so many other post-secondary educators and/or religious leaders of various faith traditions to respond in this time of great need, particularly when we ourselves are having to adapt and care for loved ones of our own?

This article offers a few reflections on how my vocation as a minister and educator have pulled me through the last seven months. It does not suggest sure-fire ways of how to move through this time or the best practices in times of crisis but proposes my own particular experiences and reflections as discussion points for further consideration on the ministry of teaching and formation in the midst of three simultaneous pandemics.

Locating My Vocation Socially and in A Teaching Context

At the end of the winter quarter and into the spring quarter, both synchronously online, I was teaching at Seattle University. In those two quarters, I taught a total of two graduate courses and one new undergraduate course. The graduate courses were Internship and Integration II, a ministerial formation course for first-year internships, and Community, Culture, and Justice, a course on cultural fluency and racial justice. The undergraduate course, The Spirituality of Asian American Leadership, was a synthesis of three primary fields: theology and religion, leadership studies, and Asian American studies. This last course was a core university course under the umbrella requirement of theology and religion. Unsurprisingly, I taught a wide swath of students those two quarters. There were, among others, heterosexual White men over fifty years old who were deeply involved in critical and theological conversations around racial justice, White privilege, and the exploding events of George Floyd's death. I had conversations around voice, identity, and the unjust political history of Asians in the United States with nineteen- to twenty-three year-old Asian American and non-Asian American women, men, and people with nonbinary gender identities studying across many fields, including nursing, education, and business. And then there were students whose internships in hospital chaplaincies, churches, and other organizations were altered drastically on account of the coronavirus. We were figuring out in collective and individual conversations not only what agility and nimbleness in ministry meant but also what it meant to have a ministerial identity and vocation in the midst of intense and acute disruptions.

As a minister in the United Methodist Church and a faculty and administrative member within the academy, this year I continue to be called back to my vocation. I am a second-generation Korean American heterosexual and cisgender male who is educated and has employment. I hold other privileges, including being married and a parent and holding U.S. citizenship. I share these multiple identities because the power I hold and, consequently, the responsibilities I fulfilled, are slightly different in each of the courses I taught this year. I needed to bring different parts of who I am into these ministerial and pastoral spaces in teaching. Social location and intersectional theories highlight this point, particularly how our multiple social

identities help to shape meaning depending upon the context in which we find ourselves.[5]

Ministry in A Ministry Course

In the course for ministerial students engaged in their internships, I leaned upon my pastoral identity and past experiences, coupled with my administrative responsibilities as director, to navigate through such an uncertain time for the students. In the middle of our shift from in-person to online education, I had the wonderful opportunity to speak with a student interning at a hospital as a chaplain. At one point in the conversation, the student, who had taken a circuitous route in their pursuit of the master of divinity degree, began to share about sitting with a family who unexpectedly had to deal with the loss of their young father and spouse. The student, with all their wisdom, kindness, and leadership, tended to the family. In retelling this story to me through videoconferencing, the student began to get choked up and tears filled their eyes. I asked the student to say more about what was occurring, and the student commented that since they had been on a long and sometimes unclear journey, this moment, in the midst of a health crisis, was an affirmation of their call toward ordination and life-giving ministry. It was a holy moment for both of us learners. The student was learning to affirm their developing identity as a minister while I, too, was being reminded why I am committed to this work and view teaching and education as the primary space for my vocational ministry, even if done virtually.

Ministry in An Asian American Studies Course

In the Asian American spirituality and leadership course with undergraduate students, my Korean American identity, ministerial and theological sensibilities, and status as a faculty member in the academy all contributed to my ability to engage students in conversations and learning around organized religion, theology, and faith. Unsurprisingly, I found that for the most part the students, even at a Catholic university, were skeptical at best about needing to take a required religion course in their core curriculum. At worst, they deeply despised and were suspicious of, rightly or wrongly, organized religion and the discipline of theology. The first pandemic, the

coronavirus, threw much into chaos, partly through the shortening of the quarter by one week to allow professors more time to prepare for a fully online synchronous class. It did not take long into the spring quarter for all involved to also realize that "Zoom fatigue" and the possibility of becoming "Zoombies" were real.

As the university moved toward synchronous digital learning and the students were consequently on synchronous calls throughout the days and weeks, asking what an embodied and relational pedagogy might look like in a virtual world became one of the ongoing internal conversations I held as an educator. If we were to learn and make the most of the challenging times, I had to listen to my body while also inquiring about the students' energy levels and ability to focus.[6] As an educator, it was good practice to receive mid-quarter feedback to contribute to an iterative learning process; relational and embodied education is an art and dance that co-learners (including the instructor) co-create through honest and truthful interaction. As a minister and someone the students identified as a representative of the church, I had the opportunity to offer corrective and compassionate actions that countered the preconceived notions most students held concerning people of the cloth and the church.[7] Organized religion for them was mostly about institutions overlooking people and their needs in the name of organizational and dogmatic self-preservation. And in this time of crises and upheaval, what better way for the church to give witness to its call to care than in a virtually communal classroom and learning experience?

I occasionally began classes with a short ritual I had learned from one of my own students in a previous ministerial class. Each person would take a few brief seconds to finish the sentence "I could talk about _____" and then would share in a word or short phrase what was occupying their minds and hearts as they entered class.[8] In this ritual, there is no explanation or questions asked, only a simple hearing of one's voice, which offers a small portal for a community learner to enter our sacred space. I would also ask students if and how they were keeping sane and whether they were physically taking walks around their residences. I even gave extra credit if by the next class students walked at least fifteen minutes, even though my own educational philosophy is to not offer extra-credit work. These are some of the small ways I adapted an in-person relational pedagogy to an online, digital one.

I conceived the course in a way that took the best intentions of theology and religion and put those into conversation with spirituality and Asian American studies. When I had put together the course during the fall quarter, little did I know how fitting it would be the following spring when conversations around racial oppression and injustice would again take center stage. Most students had never taken an Asian American class and, outside of the Japanese internments, had little exposure to Asian American history and critical studies in any of their education prior to or during college. I introduced the social construction of Asians in America through a historical survey of U.S. policy and media representations. I then pulled these into conversations around the best intentions of organized religion.

A guiding question I repeatedly asked was, What fuels you and grounds your work? Here, I brought in Paul Tillich's ground of being and ultimate concern. It was a reverse engineering way of discussing the best religion offers humanity and social living.[9] By asking this question of students and of guest speakers we brought into class, we kept a lingering and existential question at the fore. This question is important no matter the context, but here it was especially poignant amid multiple pandemics, a time when students were faced with the stark reality of people they knew becoming sick, or were participating in civil protests just a few blocks from campus, or had family members in law enforcement. As a theological minister and ministerial theologian, I was able to bring up vocation without ever naming it as such. Because of the work we did in this course, several students shared that they were now thinking more intentionally about their purpose in life, the meaning behind the work they aspired to do, and organized religion. The multiple pandemics offered a rich space to ask some of these questions that deeply matter to people today and, quite frankly, allowed me, as an educator, to be creative with the subject matter of religion that is usually taught toward the discipline rather than toward learning based in one's current context.

Ministry for Racial Justice and Antiracism

The Asian American studies course and the course I taught on community, culture, and justice were timely in light of the pandemic of unnecessary brutality and killings of Black and Brown bodies. Students in both classes shared their disgust, frustration, and fatigue. Whereas in the Asian

American undergraduate course most students were younger and were nonreligiously affiliated Asian Americans, Blacks, or Latinxs, most of the students in the graduate course were religiously affiliated Whites.Many of the students were disgusted with yet another senseless beating and murder of a Black life. They were frustrated that constructed systems and structures continued to perpetuate injustice and found this exhausting. Many took our conversations to action, leading or showing up at rallies and protests in the city or participating in conversations with their own communities, including their faith communities, around antiracism and racial justice.

The shape of our conversations focused upon matters of racial justice and agency as we tried to understand what appropriate and faithful responses might look like given our specific and respective social locations. The Latino male in the undergraduate course who apologized for not being able to be in class because his most genuine response to the pandemic of brutality would take him out of class to protest made me face my own call to bless and encourage him to do so but also keep his own safety in mind. It would have been disingenuous of me as an educator and minister who is committed to personal, collective, and systemic transformation to have prevented this young man from living into an emerging vocation. He was beginning to answer the question of what fueled him and, in doing so, embodied the best of praxis-based education. The White, female graduate student who shared that she wanted to be involved with matters of racial justice and antiracism and yet hedged about how to participate in mixed-race meetings was also coming into her sense of appropriate response and agency. She learned through participating in an anti-racist group what it meant for her to show up in Black-led and mostly Black-participant groups. She shared how valuable it was to be "called in" by Blacks to this work rather than be "called out" for her lack of knowledge. She offered that this was the type of co-learning she needed to become a better White advocate, ally, and accomplice in the work of antiracism.[10] Her agency was far different than the Latino male's agency, which was different than the agency of the Asian American women, Black men, and other White individuals in those two courses. Nevertheless, we worked to identify and articulate what committed and faithful responses to the two pandemics—the coronavirus and police killings of Black people—might be.

We began the spring quarter by adjusting to one pandemic and then faced another halfway through, and our conversations were simultaneously

life-giving and difficult. They encouraged life in that we did not shy away from pressing matters, and we held these conversations in trusting community. They were difficult because everyone was tired, which both reflected and contributed to the larger society's exhaustion. Conversations around justice matters and health are difficult in relatively stress-free times and more so in upheaval and chaos, and yet, this was precisely what we were doing and what needed to be done.

Hospitality, Interdependence, and Mutual Honor

We moved successfully through the rest of the spring quarter, and then I relocated to a new institution, Church Divinity School of the Pacific, where our classes also worked to establish foundational pieces of good teaching and ministry. First, I set hospitality and generosity as the primary dynamics I would model and expect all to practice with each other. This is not always easy, particularly in multiple pandemics when stress and anxiety levels are heightened. But if we commit to teaching as a relational act, it affords those involved an opportunity to move past transactional education toward something potentially transformative and healing. Educators and ministers know this; we realize how crucial it is to create spaces that name the realities that exist in the persons among us. Generous hospitality to individuals and their current state is the type of ministry needed in multiple crises for it allows us to repair any fractures of the soul and to heal. Furthermore, we are finding out that the blending of public and private spaces in synchronous videoconferencing calls can add more texture and reveal our humanity. When we see a student's family member walk behind them on a video call, it reminds us that we are in community with more than minds and bodies on a computer screen. We are working with people who are dealing with daily stress in their family systems, with children who need to be fed and educated, all while the student among us tries to bring their best selves and fullest attention to the few hours we have with them on a call. We are reminded that a holistic ministry in teaching is hospitable to the mind, body, soul, and social relations of each class member.

Second, interdependence, an idea we discussed in the Asian American course, is appropriate for any transformative education and ministry. Whether one reads the Dalai Lama's reflections on interdependence or is drawn to Martin Luther King's words on interrelatedness, the reflections

that (1) someone's handwashing across the globe could affect the health of persons in other countries and (2) others' lack of well-being in their Black or Brown bodies is intimately tied to our own well-being are truths I keep reminding myself of and conveying to my students.[11] We are global citizens who must find the courage to claim that we are mutually dependent upon one another, not autonomous individuals. Now is not the time for xenophobia or labeling. It is a time to live truthfully and acknowledge and accept that we are deeply intertwined with one another's lives.[12]

Lastly, when our ministries exude generous hospitality and acknowledge our deep interdependence as human beings, we are better positioned to honor one another.[13] In one of my final experiences at my prior institution, my colleague Dr. Edward Donalson III and I had the wonderful opportunity to visit various graduates at the end of the spring quarter. Our faculty decided to honor graduates from each of our degree programs by divvying up the list of students and personally driving to their respective residences to deliver a gift and heartfelt congratulations on behalf of the school. I had an inkling but could never have anticipated how much joy this act would bring to students *and* to faculty. After a long and disrupted winter and spring, visiting students reawakened in us the social closeness that ministry and education both offer and demand, even though we kept socially distant on the visits.

One student, who lived in a building that had taken drastic measures to curb any potential threat to the large number of vulnerable elderly persons in their building, was not allowed to cross the sliding glass door just a few feet from us to visit outside. Still, we could feel the warmth in our hearts that was present among the three of us as we honored and shared community with one another; that was sacred *kairos* time. A few other students had invited family members and loved ones who had supported them through their educational journey to be with them to mark this occasion. Together, the students dressed in their graduate gowns and we in our doctoral robes, we honored their accomplishments and transition into a new beginning of leadership, service, and ministry. These acts to honor one another was the best teaching *I* could have received this past spring, and I imagine it was the same for many of the students with whom I had the privilege of navigating these pandemics.

A Last Word on Vocation

Most educators aspire to break into this profession and the field of teaching because of a sense of vocation.[14] Admittedly, the demands of the profession do not make educators always feel this way; grading often feels like tedious work. At the same time, I think that reading the thoughts of a student in a well-reflected paper that reveals their exploration and curiosity fulfills a large part of most teachers' vocation. We get to see how people grow and transform over the course of earning a degree, an amazing gift to an educator. Teaching in multiple pandemics has given me an opportunity to reconsider my vocation and the reason why I got into, and stay in, in this profession. My vocation is to see people change and transform and, more so now than ever, to be a part of individuals' and society's healing. This fits right into my call as a minister to bridge church and world through compassion, mercy, and justice. And, because of where the world currently sits, the need for more humane and critically reflective moments in teaching that reach deeply into people's lives and contexts is now all the more essential.[15]

NOTES

1 I thank Dr. Edward Donalson III, a Black bishop, academic colleague, and friend, for pointing out that the term 'pandemic' could be used to refer to the unnecessary killing and brutality of Black and Brown lives.

2 For a litany of Black lives and to pay your respects, see the #Say Their Names list for 2020, Say Every Name, accessed September 25, 2020, https://sayevery.name/.

3 A quick internet search reveals many documentaries and articles on Emmett Till. One of these, *The Murder of Emmett Till* from Public Broadcasting Service, is an especially poignant and gripping narrative of the events. See *The Murder of Emmett Till*, PBS (Public Broadcasting Service), accessed September 25, 2020, https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/films/till/.

4 The coronavirus pandemic has reached global proportions, but protests in support of Black Lives Matter have also become rallying points in other countries worldwide.

5 Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge, *Intersectionality* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2016); Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1, no. 8 (1989): 139–67, accessed October 9, 2020, http://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/uclf/ vol1989/iss1/8.

6 bell hooks is a pedagogue who embraces embodied, engaged, and performative teaching as a way for transformation to occur. See *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994); Deborah H. C. Gin and Mark Chung Hearn, "Why You Do What You Do: The Power in Knowing and Naming Pedagogies," in *Teaching Theology and Religion* 22, no. 1 (January 2019): 30–51.

7 By 'church,' I refer not only to the universal Christian church but, more broadly, to organized religion. I use the specificity of Christian language due to my own adherence to a particular tradition as well as the university's situatedness in that same tradition. However, my students' views were mainly about any forms of organized religion.

8 I thank Christie Dahlin for sharing this ritual with one of my previous classes.

9 It is important to note that this was not a bait-and-switch move in which I drew them in with one discipline or conversation (e.g., Asian American studies) only to then talk about religion. Rather, students from the outset knew this was a core and experimental religion course that aimed to discuss religion through these other, important filters. I was very clear at the outset that I came at this work as a Christian minister who was also a member of the academy. So, while I hold a hybrid identity that works for the good of two spaces, I can also fairly critique as prophetic witness (i.e., truth-telling) those two spaces. Students appreciated this approach to teaching religion.

10 "Accomplice" is the next iteration of how a White person committed to antiracism could see themselves in this work. See "Opportunities for White People in the Fight for Racial Justice," White Accomplices, accessed October 9, 2020, www.whiteaccomplices.org; Colleen Clemens, "Ally or Accomplice? The Language of Activism," Teaching Tolerance, June 5, 2017, https://www.tolerance.org/magazine/ally-or-accomplice-the-language-of-activism.

11 Bstan-'dzin-rgya-mtsho (the Dalai Lama), *Beyond Religion: Ethics for a Whole World* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2011); Martin Luther King and Coretta Scott King, *Strength to Love* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 2010).

12 Christine Pohl has a helpful section on living truthfully with one another as a practice that sustains community. See *Living into Community: Cultivating Practices That Sustain Us* (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 2012), 111-58.

13 Similarly, Kathleen T. Talvacchia states that multicultural teaching entails bringing heart and mind to a place of understanding "those who are 'other' to us, rather than merely changing our teaching technique." See Kathleen T. Talvacchia, *Critical Minds and Discerning Hearts: A Spirituality of Multicultural Teaching* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2003), 7.

14 Mary Hinton, "The Vocational Cycle to Support Institutional Justice: A Pathway for Scholars of Color to Transform Institutional Life and Governance," in *Teaching for A Culturally Diverse and Racially Just World*, ed. Eleazar S. Fernandez (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014), 184–201; L. Gregory Jones and Stephanie Paulsell, eds., *The Scope of Our Art: The Vocation of the Theological Teacher* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2002).

15 I think here of Frederick Buechner's oft-quoted wisdom that vocation is "the place where your deep gladness meets the world's deep need." *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker's ABC* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993), 119.