Ministry Formation in the Places of Wisdom

John Senior

Many field educators tell a familiar story about the relationship between wisdom and ministry formation: ministry, as many have recognized, is fundamentally about wisdom. Wisdom is a kind of knowledge of the fitting, what Greek thinkers termed *phronesis*—the ability, as Aristotle said, to do the right thing for the right people at the right time. Wisdom understood in this way is an irreducibly practical form of knowledge; it is also deeply embodied. One learns wisdom through practice and intentional forms of reflection on practice, and, critically, in conversation with a wise mentor who is themself continuing to learn from experience. In the process of "reflective practice," wisdom becomes deeply rooted not only in the things one knows but in one's instincts, the ways one's body responds to situations, and one's worldview. Wisdom, at its deepest level, is a way of seeing the world, a way of being in the world, and a way of responding to the world.

The best mentors for ministry, whether they be field education directors, internship setting supervisor-mentors, or other mentoring figures in a student's life, understand that they are in a continuing movement of "reflective practice." Through the practice of discernment, good mentors are

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open to God's ongoing call to the life and work of ministry for them and for the communities they serve. Wise ministry practitioners know that they are never a finished product. Traditional models of theological education rightly position supervisor-mentors as "more finished" than the students they mentor. Wise supervisor-mentors know how to leverage their experience in their work and their wisdom about it to encourage students in their own process of discernment about their journey in ministry. On occasion, good supervisor-mentors leverage their wisdom in a prescriptive way by saying, "No, you really shouldn't do that," or, "If you go about this in the way you're imagining, I can tell you what's going to happen." Mostly, though, good mentors, secure enough in their own ongoing process of formation, invite their student-mentees into a fulsome exploration of their own vocational journey, embracing both laudable achievements and cringeworthy missteps.

In traditional field education or "supervised ministry" pedagogies, the locus of wisdom, implicitly or explicitly, is understood to be the "supervisor-mentor"—a person, in other words, who is well formed in their ministry vocation. The contexts or "ministry settings" (as they're often called) in which these ministry leaders work— congregations, chaplaincy settings, nonprofit settings, etc.—have been understood to remain relatively stable over time. In the traditional frame, it is as though there are these vast vocational spaces or regions, one might say, called "congregational ministry" or "chaplaincy" or "nonprofit leadership." Wise and well-formed ministry leaders have learned all of the nooks and crannies, all of the ins and outs, the complexities, the gifts and challenges, etc., of these spaces over the course of their career. Their learning emerges from an intentional and ongoing process of reflective practice.

Presumably, the spaces in which ministry leadership is practiced are always changing shape. The challenges facing congregational ministry in the middle of the twentieth century, for example, are not exactly the same as those facing us now. But what happens when these spaces begin to change rapidly or dramatically? The current COVID-19 crisis is instructional in this way. The learning curve for ministry under the conditions of a pandemic is dramatic. Congregational ministers are learning, on the fly, how to convene their communities remotely in online worship services, peer group gatherings, and other opportunities to be community together. They are navigating hard questions about what it means to celebrate Communion

and preside at baptisms and funerals in online spaces. Hospital chaplains are learning how to support patients, their families, and hospital staff under conditions of limited physical access and restricted movement. Pastoral caregivers working in counseling practices are learning how to provide therapy on electronic platforms. All of the above and many more are feeling the fatigue of their vocational lives mediated through Zoom, Facebook, and other electronic platforms. A growing number of ministry leaders are beginning to process the trauma associated with death caused by this virus and the exhaustion that navigating relentless change brings.

Ministry in the context of the current coronavirus pandemic points to the ways in which space is itself a carrier of wisdom. When I use the term "space" here, I mean the distinctive patterns and practices of association that human beings create to organize their life together in distinctive ways. Some thinkers might use the terms "tradition" or "institution" similarly. Spaces, understood in this way, have histories; they are created, maintained, and modified over time by human communities and their successors. Spaces carry wisdom, in the sense that they contain the deeply rooted patterns and practices of life together that persons and communities learn, rehearse, embody, and also modify and riff on over time. Wise practitioners are intelligible only in relatively stable spaces. One can only learn to be a good preacher—even a singular or extraordinary preacher—if there are spaces in which preaching as a practice of corporate life is intelligible. The same goes for all of the practices of ministry leadership: pastoral care, religious education, worship leadership, mission and outreach, program development and administration, and the like. Concomitantly, theological schools train and form professional leaders who have the skill set to function well in relatively stable ecclesial spaces. Theologically trained professionals know, for example, how to preach a sermon in spaces in which preaching is and continues to be intelligible; they learn how to offer pastoral care in spaces in which pastoral caregiving is intelligible; they learn how to provide religious instruction in spaces in which that practice is intelligible.

Wisdom arises through reflective practice. But reflective practice is only meaningful in the spaces in which the practices about which practitioners are reflective are intelligible. By upsetting access to space, COVID-19 is pushing against the conditions of wisdom. Preachers still preach—but what does it mean to deliver an impactful sermon on Zoom? Worship leaders still lead worship—but how do you do it on Facebook Live? A congregant dies

of complications related to the coronavirus. How does the funeral happen? Does it happen online? Is there a graveside service where all the mourners position themselves six feet apart from one another? What does wisdom look like when ministry practices, and reflective practitioners, are quite literally displaced?

COVID-19 is certainly a dramatically different moment, posing profound, if not unique, medical, social, economic, political, and public health challenges. But it comes as a sudden departure in the context of the rapid institutional change in North American Christian traditions that is already underway. Scholars and analysts have been attentive to the "changes" in the "American religious landscape," to use a familiar shorthand, for more than two decades now. Christian traditions are wrestling with declining participation and interest in the received patterns and practices of church and religious life. Americans who claim to be "spiritual but not religious" do not look to traditional forms of faith community in which to express their religiosity. The spaces of ministry practice are challenged to change in response to these and other cultural and historical pressures. Similarly, ministry leaders are challenged not only to provide the various forms of leadership to which they are called—forms of leadership that make ministry as a vocation distinctive from other forms of professional formation—but to work with their communities to reconfigure the spaces in which those forms of leadership are intelligible and meaningful.

Theological education has long operated on the assumption that seminaries and schools of theology are forming ministry leaders who, following graduation, will be called to a position and will more or less take over where their predecessors left off, leading relatively stable organizations into a new chapter of their corporate life. Sure, there may be some growing pains in a transitional season as communities of faith welcome new leadership, often occasioning the opportunity to revisit and revise mission and vision. But following a time of transition, ministers will do what ministers do in the spaces they have prepared to inhabit and in which their distinctive form of professional work makes sense.

That assumption of institutional stability, of the integrity of space, no longer makes sense. Seminary graduates, along with the ministry practitioners from whom they learn, need to orient themselves to the work of reconceiving the spaces in which their professional formation is geared at the very same time that they lead and serve in these spaces. They must, in

other words, rebuild the boat while it is sailing. The good news is that wisdom does not cease. Reflective ministry leaders are constantly exploring emerging wisdom about their work as they continue to labor in the rapidly changing American religious landscape. Wisdom does not cease. How can persons who are preparing for ministry learn from emerging wisdom?

Here, another spatial challenge is relevant, and that challenge has to do with academic space. The academic classroom has always been a fraught space in which to explore and foster ministry formation. Classroom spaces, and the pedagogies its teachers learn to perform in those spaces, are not naturally resonant with the work of reflective practice. Academic classroom spaces traditionally encourage transactional pedagogies: the expert stands at the front of the room and delivers expertise to a mostly passive student audience. Classroom spaces encourage the delivery, analysis, and critique of discursive forms of knowledge. Classrooms are largely sequestered from the world of practice. Indeed, classrooms are intentionally set apart, pulled away from the messiness and complexity of the spaces in which human beings build multiple forms of community. The university campus itself is a space that signals the presence of discursive activities aimed at generating understanding and insight about what is going on "out there."

The work that happens in academic classrooms is vital and important. But classrooms are challenging spaces in which to foster vocational formation for ministry. Some might say that classrooms are ideally positioned for the "reflective" part of "reflective practice." That is true to an extent—but academic spaces often denigrate reflection to the extent that reflection is attentive to questions of personal and corporate experience, identity, practical wisdom, vocation, and sense of purpose. These are often understood not to constitute "real" areas of academic inquiry.

Moreover, academic production is rooted in research. Academic research comes up behind realities already manifest in the world and attempts to analyze, understand, and make meaning of them. Research is also noble and vital work. But a research orientation to the world may not best serve the purposes of vocational formation for ministry in an era in which the spaces in which ministry happens are changing so rapidly. Research may not be quick enough on the draw.

The questions that seem to me pressing for the theological academy are, How can seminaries and schools of theology best engage and capture the wisdom about the practice of ministry in a context of profound change,

even as new wisdom is bubbling up from the reflective learning of wise practitioners every day? What kind of education would connect to and explore emerging forms of wisdom in ways that benefit novice learners?

One frame that may be helpful in this regard is rooted in an awareness of the assets that a school has and can leverage towards the ends of education. Traditionally, schools of higher education are understood to possess one primary asset: expertise. Learned academics develop sophisticated understandings of the fields of inquiry of which they are expert contributors. This, too, is a vital and important pursuit. Expertise aligns well with a conception of space—both academic and ecclesial—that is relatively stable. Stable spaces can be isolated, analyzed, and understood. Wisdom, on the other hand, aligns well with spaces in transition. Reflective practitioners who are navigating changing spaces every day are always adjusting their sense of what is fitting for those spaces as they change.

What if academic institutions thought more broadly about the assets they have that would position them to access and engage emerging wisdom about the life and work of ministry? Academic institutions have the capacity to convene wise practitioners who can work with one another to explore their learning about ministry. At my own institution, my colleague Fred Bahnson has expertly convened practitioners who work in various regions of the food justice, agriculture, and ecology worlds to share emerging wisdom about their work in ministry. Students get to participate in these gatherings, too, and have the opportunity not only to overhear but also to participate in the conversations happening among these gifted practitioners. These convenings also have the benefit of creating and strengthening a network of ministry practitioners who work in the food justice, agriculture, and ecology spaces. Bahnson's work has demonstrated that convening and networking, in addition to expertise, are assets that a school leverages to do the work of education.

To better prepare the next generation of ministry leaders, seminaries and schools of theology must close the gap between the academic classroom and the changing shape of ministry spaces in which new wisdom about the life and work of ministry is constantly emerging. Schools must be spaces in which ministry practitioners can come together for peer convening, reflection, and networking with other practitioners and with students. Schools also need to consider in a more expansive frame who their learners are—not only the students enrolled in formal degree and continuing education pro-

grams but also the practitioners who are seeking opportunities for deeper reflection. In short, schools need to find ways to become valuable partners with ministry leaders who are navigating changing landscapes of ministry so that these partnerships will become the context of ministry formation for new leaders.