LEARNING RELIGIOUS LEADERSHIP *IN SITU*
WILLEM HOUTS AND DAVID R. SAWYER

Abstract:

The art of religious leadership is not something that is easily taught in a classroom or even field education setting. The unique combination of the person, gifts, and personality of the leader, and the context, relationships, and history of the congregational setting dictate the particular form of leadership at that place and time. We suggest that one of the best ways to foster religious leadership in a congregational setting is through intentional peer learning groups. These groups have certain characteristics which allow for personal growth and discovery, allowing individuals to lead with integrity and imagination in new and unique ways.

Rosetta's Story

A pastor in her first call has encountered serious difficulties and left the congregation with no severance package. What began as relatively minor skirmishes with church leadership led to resistance and entrenchment so that Rosetta's sense of herself as pastor was increasingly called into question in her own mind and in that of the leaders of her congregation. Instinctively she dug in her heels and insisted that her position was the right one and that key members of her church who opposed her position were wrong. When denominational leaders were called in, the situation was highly polarized and anger was mounting. Neither congregational members, nor Rosetta, nor the denominational leaders had the perspective or

Willem Houts is the pastor of North Lima Presbyterian Church, the associate pastor of Rock Prairie Presbyterian Church, and the Stated Clerk of Milwaukee Presbytery.

David Sawyer recently retired as Professor of Ministry and Director of Lifelong Learning at Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary.

ability to restore a sense of calm and reconciliation in the congregation. Rosetta had been one of the bright and promising graduates of her Seminary.

For five years she has labored without support, without mentoring or coaching, without anyone to give her feedback on her practices of leadership. Subsequently she left ministry altogether. This pastor's experience has been repeated many times and provides the backdrop and motivation for this paper.

Seminary Preparation for Leadership is Insufficient

The teaching of religious leadership is an art that has grown and developed over the past half century at an amazing rate, showing a greater depth and breadth in preparing women and men to tackle the challenges that they will find in congregational settings as they engage in professional ministry. The intentionality of providing learning experiences for leadership in the curricula at seminaries and divinity schools, both in classroom and field education settings has exploded as well. Even so, the learning that is provided in these academic settings is, by definition, inadequate in preparing leaders for the challenges and opportunities that they will face in their particular ministry settings.[1] Religious leadership is an art form, not a science, because it cannot be reproduced with exacting standards and bring about the same results every time.

The Need for Organic Learning that is Current, Contextual, and Continual

The fact that each person who is called to ministry has a unique and particular set of gifts, skills, and life experiences is enough to justify this assertion. While one person may approach a particular leadership situation using similar tools and paradigms as another, the underlying experience and tenor of the action will be different simply because the person is unique.

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[1] Charles Foster et al., *Educating Clergy: Teaching Practices and Pastoral Imagination* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass a Wiley Imprint, 2006), 151.

Additionally, one cannot simply copy the actions of another person and be authentic to the call from God that the leader has received because God does indeed work in the particular and idiosyncratic rather than in universals and archetypes.

The individual leader is not the only reason that leadership is an art form that cannot be fully learned in an academic setting. The particular context of the ministry also has direct bearing on the way that leadership is exercised and the effects which that leadership will cause. The history of the particular religious community has a great deal of influence in what is expected from the leader(s) and also the parameters in which the leader is expected to operate. The broader cultural context in which the congregation is situated also influences the methods of providing leadership, recognizing that intentions and actions are mediated by the vernacular understanding of the people who are interacting with the leader and the decisions made by the community of faith. This means than no action at one location, even if implemented by the same individual, will have the same outcome at another location even if the context is similar. Further, in the past two decades, the knowledge base of ministry has exploded beyond the ability of most ministry professionals to keep up on a regular basis with individual reading and reflection. And the church situation continues to change in exponential ways. The gleanings from a seminary education no longer suffice for the new and emerging concerns of church and society.[2]

Finally, human systems are not static. The dynamism of congregational systems means that no opportunity or challenge will ever be encountered the same way twice. The leader, even if it is the same person, the faith community, and the context are in a constant state of

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[2] Christopher Hammon, "Connected Learning for Ministry in a Technological Age," in Robert Reber and Bruce Roberts, eds., *A Lifelong Call to Learn Continuing Education for Religious Leaders* (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2010), 279.

growth and change. A successful decision made at one time will not have the exact same results when executed at a later time, because change has occurred and the actors are not the same.

Continuing Ministry Education Needs to be Particular Not General

These factors, when taken together, show that teaching a particular form or method of religious leadership in an academic setting will not suffice. Instead, tools that can be used in multiple situations and adapted to multiple contexts are needed. Even so, it is incumbent upon the leader, in consultation with the community of faith, to figure out what methods, tools, and practices are needful in addressing a particular opportunity or challenge.

Because there is the need for continual improvisation and innovation in providing leadership for a community of faith, there is a need for continual learning on the part of the leader. The simple fact that there is such a demand to provide new ways of thinking about the current situation requires consultation and moving outside of the ways that the community has always thought about its situation. This is particularly the case for individuals experiencing their first call in ministry.

Those engaging in professional ministry for the first time are in particular need of continual learning. The information imparted within formalized theological education can never be enough to get the leader through their first call. The material presented in a seminary or divinity school setting cannot be mastered without practicing it in a real ministry. The way that one implements the material, as mentioned earlier, also depends upon the context of the ministry setting and will have to be learned through trial and error. Additionally, all of the possible tools that may be needed in a particular context, and the permutations of those tools' implementation, cannot be anticipated or taught without making the course of academic study prohibitively long.

Even if one could predict all of the tools and resources needed at a particular ministry location based on initial interactions with the individuals at that congregation, it does not mean that one would have what one needed later on. The complexity of human systems means that one cannot predict all of what will be needed, especially when one considers that often times the presented strengths and issues of a congregation do not line up with the realities of the situation. Changes in context also mean that continual learning will be needed. As opportunities and challenges are met, new situations requiring new leadership will arise out of those interactions, necessitating new tools and learning on the part of the leader and faith community.

These new opportunities and challenges will also defy the abilities of outside experts to make pronouncements about the course a particular leader and congregation should take. While the outside expert can provide vital insights and tools, it will always fall to the faith community and the leader to develop and implement a strategy to work with their context, their gifts and skills, and their sense of call.[3] This means that responses to issues and opportunities necessarily need to be both local and organic, and not a generic one-size-fits-all strategy or pre-packaged set of tools and exercises to reach a foregone conclusion.

The Particularity of God's Presence in Ministry

This conviction arises out of both theological understandings and practical considerations. Theologically, the scandal of particularity in the person of Jesus, the Christ, points to this view of an organic local response to issues. Practically, the wisdom of the people engaging in ministry within their own context and their

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[3] Ronald Heifetz, Alexander Granshow, and Marty Linsky, *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2009), 20. The authors specifically point to the need to move beyond the use of authoritative knowledge to the full participative work of stakeholders in facing adaptive challenges.

sense of ownership in the response will almost always bring forward better solutions and more sustained effort in implementation.

When one looks at the person of Jesus of Nazareth, one sees a man born in a particular time and place, learning particular ways of speaking, thinking, arguing, teaching, and being. He responded to the particularities of the social milieu around him and the actions of people who were part of the same cultural situation in which he lived. Being born in the first century CE in Judea also limited his scope of interactions and ways of seeing the world. As the Christ, Jesus is also seen as universal, being able to relate to diverse cultures and time periods, transcending languages, gender, and life experiences.[4] This seeming contradiction is often referred to as the scandal of particularity since the finite nature of Jesus' human existence seems unpalatable when one tries to affirm Christ's universality. However, in this particularity, we do see how God works within the scope of history. God chooses to work in small, intimate situations, engaging individuals in all of their peculiarities and context, addressing their particular needs and working for the revelation of the realm of God in ways that do not always seem congruent with what has occurred in other places and times. In fact, the entirety of the Biblical witness seems to indicate that God will not work otherwise. God shuns the broad universal, unilateral actions that may, to human viewpoints, be more efficient in bringing God's chosen end to fruition.

This insight indicates that we, as disciples of Jesus the Christ, should expect nothing different than working in the particular. In fact, we need to embrace the power of the particular, recognizing that ministry and leadership need to be practiced in ways that conform to the contours of the local context and people. To do otherwise could be seen as contrary to God's way, as well as missing the important work of engaging with other

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[4] William C. Placher, *Jesus the Savior: The Meaning of Jesus Christ for Christian Faith*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 36-37

human beings in all of their giftedness and flaws, seeing them as creations of God imbued with something of the divine.

Practically, those living within a certain context and set of circumstances often will have a greater "ownership" of a program, solution, or process if they are actively engaged in its formulation and implementation. These actions will also have a greater chance of reaching others within the same context since they will hopefully be expressed in the vernacular of that locale, allowing for easier transmission and permutation as the interventions unfold. Those interventions from outside the situation may have the challenge of getting lost in translation since the local culture may not easily absorb the ideas because of different experiences or modes of being.

Additionally, the wisdom of individuals and leaders within a system typically surpass that of an outside expert who brings their assumptions from their external contexts and experiences. Not only do those within a healthy system understand the context within which they exist, but they also have a healthy esteem of their own gifts and skills as well as their limitations. These particularities, when taken together, indicate that the leader and congregation within the system should be able to craft responses to issues and opportunities that will be more effective in their implementation and success.

This emphasis on organic local solution to problems, however, does not negate the need for outside learning and even observation from those not participating within the system. No leader or faith community can know all that is needed for any given project. Likewise, the leader and congregation will not always have knowledge of the full range of options available to them. Consultation with experts in a variety of fields will be needed for effective leadership and ministry. Additionally, the very fact that the leader and faith community exist within its context may make it difficult to see things that they have long taken as givens. An outside observer may assist them in gaining a greater view of their situation simply by asking

insightful questions that push the group to examine their biases and predispositions.

Peer Learning Groups as an Organic and Particular Learning Tool

All of these factors, taken together, indicate that religious leaders need to have tools that help them to continually learn more about themselves, their faith communities, their context, and ways of intervening in a variety of situations. These tools also need to emphasize the wisdom of the leader and the faith community regarding the context in which they minister while encouraging perspective taking and examination of closely held beliefs. One tool that addresses all of these needs is the peer learning group.

Ministers have found ways to get together in many formations over the years. Perhaps the most common among protestant pastors is the lectionary study group, which provides participants opportunities to reflect on the scripture readings for sermon preparation for upcoming worship experiences. A second common type is the support group, which forms for the emotional and spiritual nurture and undergirding of the members. And the third common model is the book study group, which focuses on a single book commonly read by the group members for each meeting time. The peer learning group carries some of the elements of these three models, but it has a more precise purpose and expected outcome.

A peer learning group is designed for the growth and adaptive learning of its participants. It is based on adult-learning theory and knowledge and is built on the findings of educational research that indicates that people learn best when they are in charge of their own learning goals and processes. Furthermore, the learning needed is not simply the acquisition of new knowledge, but requires attention to new and uncharted problems in particular congregations and denominations. Ministers who acknowledge their need for new kinds of learning are prime candidates for participation in a peer learning group. Denominational leaders and seminary

administrators are also in a good position to encourage seminary graduates to continue their lifelong learning using the peer learning group model.

The Organic Process of the Peer Learning Group

A peer learning group ordinarily identifies its individual and group objectives before launching the group experience.[5] These then form the background of an early task of the group. After time for members to get-acquainted with each other and begin to build a level of trust, the group forms its agenda for its early life together. First on the agenda should be a covenant agreement that integrates the group objectives, clarifies the leadership roles in the group, identifies ground rules for group participation including accountability standards by which the members will hold each other to their covenants. Also early in the group's life, rituals of prayer and common worship are identified or created for the life of the group. Many peer learning groups also include in their agendas and covenants times for play, recreation, travel, and relaxation.

Leadership of the peer learning group has continued to be an area of conversation among those practicing the model. Those who have used grant money to organize and research these groups have run groups with a strong leader/teacher who helps to structure the time, groups with a mentor or guide who stands by to assist but does not directly lead, and groups that share leadership among themselves without a designated outside leader. The primary researcher for these projects, J. Bruce Roberts, reports that the results of effectiveness of the groups are equal among the several models of leadership. This suggests that an important element of the peer learning process is for the groups themselves to decide what kinds of leadership model they prefer.

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[5] Richard Hester and Kelli Walker-Jones, *Know Your Story and Lead with It,* (Herndon VA: The Alban Institute, 2009). See their outline of the development of a peer learning group for another example of the process.

Group norms are part of the group formation time. Many group norm models are available for groups to adapt to their individual group needs and preferences. Here is the one we used in peer learning groups in classes at Louisville Seminary:

Responsibility of each member of the peer learning community:
- To speak one's own truth as one feels safe to do so, by telling one's own story.
- To feel free to speak or not speak without any pressure to participate.
- To listen for one's own "inner teacher" in responding to the dilemmas of ministerial formation.

Responsibility of the Faculty Facilitator:
- To encourage good ministerial formation through creating and protecting a safe and appreciative space in the group by leading and by example.

Rules for holding a safe space in relating to others in a peer learning community:
- Ask only questions that you don't know the answer to, that arise from your curiosity about the story of the other, that do not presume a right answer.
- No fixing
- No advising
- No saving
- No trying to convert

Groups proceed as their covenant and agendas decide. The best learning in the groups arises from real and particular situations of concern or ministerial dilemmas presented to the group for discussion and learning. Hester and Walker-Jones suggest a most intriguing approach to learning reflection that is organic

and particular—the use of narrative[6]. Members prompt each other to reflect on their own personal stories, including early childhood, call stories, and then stories of what is happening in their present ministry situations. Groups can become adept at listening to the stories respectfully and with open curiosity, and helping the story-teller recognize the character of each story, and also to recognize elements of the story that did not get included in the original telling. These are elements that Hester and Walker-Jones call stories that were "left on the cutting room floor"[7] in the editing and telling and retelling of stories. Often stories are focused on problems and become saturated with negative feelings and discouragement. The ability to get the stories out in front of the group also allows some perspective on them so that the teller is encouraged to find ways to construct the story in more hopeful ways and become the writer of preferred outcomes of the stories.

As the group deepens in organic trust and ability to work together, the quality of the particular stories improve and the amount of transformative learning that happens grows. We offer here a simple set of criteria for whether creative growth or transformation has happened:

- Has there been an increase in knowledge and expanded awareness of truth?
- Has there been an increase in respect for the dignity of difference among members?
- Has there been a growth in a sense of community in the group?
- Has the group seen an increase in the ability to take positive mutual action in response to events?[8]

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6 Ibid.

7 Richard Hester, conversation with David Sawyer, October 2011, Louisville, KY.

8 David Sawyer, *Hope in Conflict* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2007), 103.

**Peer Learning Groups for First Call and for
Later Career Ministers**

Most of the peer learning groups studied by Bruce
Roberts in *A Lifelong Call to Learn*[9] were aimed at mid-
career ministers, although not exclusively. Recently the
Wayne E. Oates Institute in Kentucky has begun
exploring the possibility of offering peer learning groups
as a launchpad for new seminary graduates. Many studies
have focused on the first call experience and providing
assistance for that transition, and a few denominations
have offered limited opportunities for learning groups for
seminary graduates, but no other program has yet been
initiated to set graduates off into their ministry with the
help and learning guide of their peers. A lifelong learning
launchpad makes good on the statement that "you can't
learn everything you need to know for ministry in
seminary." Seminary now provides the initial education
for ministry, and the launchpad program provides the
first steps in lifelong learning. It can also prepare
seminary graduates for the reality that they will need to
be involved in peer learning experiences in their first calls
and it will attune them to the need for group process
skills and abilities in praxis reflection on ministry. The
launchpad model would utilize ministers' own continuing
education funding plus funding from grant sources for at
least one face-to-face meeting per year and then support
and encouragement for online group process in between
for a period of two years. Each group would also be
afforded a mentor who could help train the group in
process and educational issues at the face-to-face events
and who could be on call for assistance as the group
life emerges.

Mid- and late-career ministers are also in need of
continuing learning for the same reasons given above.
The books one used in seminary are out of date, and
many of the professors who taught mid-career pastors
have retired from the seminaries. But the knowledge base

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[9] Reber and Roberts, *A Lifelong Call to Learn Continuing Education for Religious
Leaders,* 2010.

and the systemic changes for ministry are even more acute for these practitioners.

David's Story of a Late-Career Peer Learning Group

When the seminary's administrative support for the position of Director of Lifelong Learning and Advanced Degrees was dramatically decreased in 2009, David faced a vocational and educational crossroads. He knew he had to find ways to retool his approach and refresh his spirit for the new reality. He helped gather a group of six ministers who were also in late stages of various careers in church leader development. The group applied for and received a grant from the Austin Seminary College of Pastoral Leaders[10] for a two year leaderless peer learning group to focus on the issues of systemic and organizational change using the Theory U model of Peter Senge and Otto Scharmer.[11] The group covenanted to meet together for two years to engage in a series of retreats and at least one long "road trip together." Each member gained many new insights about his ministry over the period of two years, and the group served an important function of fun and support. The fascinating downside of this group, however, was that apparently because all six were highly capable small group leaders, they skipped time to work on group norms and expectations for leadership. Each of them, holding back for fear of dominating or being inappropriately designated as "the" leader, withheld valuable group process knowledge and declined to make needed interventions when the group's process stalled. The group made this realization at their last, summarizing meeting at the end of the two year process. Each of the participants would probably support the conclusions of this article about the importance and usefulness of peer-support groups, but their own experience taught

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[10] http://www.austinseminary.edu/page.cfm?p=278, accessed March 2012.

[11] Otto Scharmer, *Theory U: Leading from the Future as It Emerges* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2009)

them and the peer learning group process an important lesson.

Will's Story of a First Call Peer Learning Group

At the beginning of his first call, Will was approached by a member of the judicatory asking if he would be interested in joining with a group of other first call pastors who had recently come into the area as well. The judicatory had seen an unusual influx of seven first call pastors in the last year and decided with the critical mass, it was appropriate to use resources to support these people in what has often been seen as the hardest part of ministry. The judicatory decided that it would be appropriate to have an experienced pastor and small group facilitator hired to guide the group as it met.

The group was composed of seven pastors from a variety of different backgrounds serving in very different ministry settings. All of the members had had some employment experience prior to attending seminary, with some being definitively second-career and others having just a couple years in the work force before attending seminary. Two of the group members were engaged as Associate Pastors working in larger, multi-staff congregations; two other group members were full-time pastors of smaller, family- or pastoral-sized congregations; hospital chaplaincy was the calling of another two members; one member served as a half-time tentmaker in a family-sized congregation. The group had more females than males and also favored married individuals over single. The original facilitator was a male member of the judicatory who had extensive training in small group process and had served in a number of different calls.

The group started meeting on a monthly basis, sharing the joys and struggles of ministry, asking questions to help each other clarify their situations and responses to the challenges that they faced. Originally, the design of the program included a time of didactic, but after several sessions, it was decided that the act of sharing narratives and having responses from the

members of the group and the facilitator was most helpful in working through the challenges that each person was facing and the didactic portion was discontinued.

Over the course of the first five years of this program, all but one member of the group continued in their original calls. The one member who left her call had been serving in her position for eighteen months prior to the beginning of the group; she attended only two gatherings before her resignation was announced. It has been speculated that the length of time that she was in her call without support meant that the issues were already too far advanced to salvage her call in that position.

Today, almost eight years after the beginning of the peer learning group, five members still remain in their original calls. Every member has also served in some leadership role within the judicatory, some as chairs of committees, one being elected as vice moderator of the judicatory, another serving as chief parliamentary officer. At this point, the group continues to meet for support and challenge on a regular, but less frequent, basis.

In a denomination where the average first call is less than two and a half years, this program has shown the power of peer learning groups to allow members to learn more about themselves, their leadership style, their congregations and ministry context, and also to adjust their ways of leading to fit the current circumstances. There has also been a great sense of camaraderie formed in this group, allowing for a sense of support in a field where support is often not forthcoming for those in leadership positions. The fact that all members of this group have also served in leadership roles outside of their particular call indicates that leadership has been cultivated for more than just the local congregation or healthcare setting, but rather for the broader church.

Conclusion

This paper has provided an argument for the development and expansion of peer learning groups as an

organic and particular tool of lifelong learning for ministry. The research on the growing use of peer groups in American ministry education is sound and continues to proliferate, and the authors' personal experiences have borne out the value and need of such a tool. We have not addressed the implications of this argument on seminary education itself, but the implications need to be explored. Peer learning groups will not save every Rosetta or David or Will from serious vocational disruption, but we cannot support the continuing conventional expectation that ministers should be able to negotiate the infinitely expanding changes in the life of the world, the church, and the practice of ministry with only an academic master's degree.