Theological Curriculum at Methodist Theologicl School in Ohio

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"Why do I have to take a course in Church Leadership? I have been a leader in my church for years." This implicit claim of expertise through experience rings true for almost half the students matriculating at Methodist Theological School in Ohio (MTSO). So, the onset of education in the area of leadership studies underlies this common question with an identification of assumptions. First, some students believe that there remains little to learn, once one has taken the role of leadership in a congregation. Moreover, students also often perceive church leadership simply as a set of skills developed through experience.

Indeed, these student-held assumptions surface in much of the seminary curriculum. As a result, they have led to intentional faculty-wide conversations about the significance of theological education for leadership in the church. To inform these conversations, faculty members and administrative officers at MTSO communicate with judicatory and congregational leaders on a regular basis. Our purpose is to determine the intersecting needs of a variety of churches and the role of theological education in forming future church leaders. Gathering information and engaging in analysis of theological education has led to a revision of the MTSO mission statement in the last two years.[1]

The academic catalogue for MTSO features the mission statement, "In response to the grace and call of God in Jesus Christ, Methodist Theological School in Ohio is committed to excellence in theological education that equips the people of God for leadership and ministry in the church and in the

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[1] MTSO faculty has participated in a 3-year Lexington Seminar, having been awarded a grant from Lilly Foundation, Inc., sponsored by Lexington Theological School. Faculty explored and assessed MTSO's approach to theological education. Conversations revolved around a case study, "The Ethic of Nice," by Dr. Lee Johnson, Assistant Professor of New Testament. The results of the Seminar indicated that the MTSO faculty is learning to provide increasingly clear objectives for courses, based on the school's connection with judicatory needs and the mission of theological education in MTSO's context. More information about The Lexington Seminar can be found at www.lexingtonseminar.org/program/index.php.

world."[2] Equipping students for leadership and ministry expresses the focus of curriculum development and course emphasis in each academic discipline. However, interpretation of such a statement can differ, depending on the audience. Eight mainline denominations with students represented at MTSO[3] define "equipping" along the lines of requiring graduating students to know how to renew mainline or independent churches and affiliated organizations, while caring for the Christian community with competence.

Members of small congregations hope for graduates who know how to revitalize their programs, to preach with impact and to increase their attendance. Members of large congregations hope for trained staff who can make a spiritual and programmatic impact on people's busy lives. Congregations comprised of persons with specific needs in particular ecologies hope for graduates with specialized training that will address their context effectively. The MTSO faculty hopes for graduates who are biblically and theologically grounded while being emotionally intelligent and spiritually mature. They expect their students to have the ability to contextualize their work with grace and flexibility, no matter where they practice ministry. As a result, pedagogical foci include both didactic and dialogic teaching methods, so that students can encounter in the classroom both text and shared experience.

This pedagogical approach for developing leaders invites students to engage in dialectical thought. They find themselves challenged in the seminary curriculum to recognize and work effectively with paradox, by reframing their responses to material presented by the instructor, or by each other, rather than insisting on closure. Students are encouraged to seek a range of perspectives, other than relying solely on their own points of view. Therefore, the class ethos establishes a sense that students are engaged in an apprenticeship in leadership. Here, information and knowledge are not static; they emerge, rather, out of interaction with context and relationship.[4] Instructors in the

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2   2004-2005 Academic Catalogue, Methodist Theological School in Ohio, 8.

3   MTSO has 8 mainline of 24 denominations represented in the student body. Student demographic data, 2004-2005 (Registrar's Office, MTSO).

4   See Laurent A. Parks Daloz, Cheryl H. Keen, James P. Keen, Sharon Daloz Parks, *Common Fire* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), for a discussion of how relationship

church leadership field at MTSO understand "apprenticeship" to include theoretical learning as well as engaging in a mentoring or coaching context in the field.[5] Praxis requires the living into one's field with a significant theological and theoretical base. Therefore, Church Leadership and Field Education courses link their syllabi at MTSO with ongoing consultation in the Practical Division about integrating curricula in both areas with the wider work of theological education.

MTSO explicitly addresses the call from denominational and church leaders for competent, effective, and innovative church leadership. The School requires an introductory course in Church Leadership (CL 100) for all students pursuing a professional degree. Students may elect to specialize in Church Leadership (CL) if they work within the MDiv. degree curriculum. The content of this specialization, developed since 2000, continues to evolve as conversations with local churches and judicatories progress and contexts for leadership change. Five learning objectives for students applying for the specialization have been approved by the faculty and are listed in the academic catalogue:

1. To provide a theological and spiritual framework for Christian leadership
2. To learn practical/administrative applications of leadership
3. To develop insights about flexible leadership
4. To construct models for church development and renewal
5. To understand the nature of group relationships in church contexts

The theoretical framework for the five learning objectives and subsequent courses offered stems from Kennon L. Callahan's leadership book, *Effective Church Leadership: Building on the Twelve Keys.* Callahan presents a direct correlation between one's philosophy of life and

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and conversation can lead to a new sense of commitment to learning for the sake of the common good. The authors' work provides a foundation for pedagogical process, especially in chapter 4: "Conviction: Developing Critical Habits of Mind."

5   Bishop Judith Craig, retired Bishop in Residence shares teaching responsibility in the Church Leadership department with Dr. Lisa Withrow, Associate Professor of Congregational Studies.

one's understanding of the nature of leadership. "Each understanding of the nature of leadership draws on an underlying philosophy of life, is affected by its perception of the major trends emerging in the culture, and is influenced by a distinctive theology of the church. Finally, you cannot have one component without the other. Each component has implications for all."[6] The integration of life-philosophy, cultural context, and ecclesiology all contribute to the formation of leaders in the particular CL curriculum at MTSO.

Lovett Weems adds to Callahan's matrix by differentiating among administration, management, and leadership. "Leadership is the development and articulation of a shared vision, motivation of those key people without whom that vision cannot become a reality, and gaining the cooperation of most of the people involved. Both administration and management are required for effective leadership. However, administration and management alone do not equal leadership."[7] With Weems's statement in mind, students spend time throughout the courses offered in the specialization defining "leadership" as it is differentiated from administration and management. Instructors challenge students to incorporate theological concepts and move beyond trait attribution and categorization of leadership, so that class participants can describe the nature of their own leadership and the meaning of call. In addition, competencies, context analysis, and self-assessment combine with a spiritual focus for students electing to enroll in the specialization.

To accomplish the objectives for a CL specialization, students must complete five courses and a senior thesis. Four courses are required in the church leadership curriculum, there is one elective in a cross-listed field, and a leadership thesis project is developed based on the prerequisite course material. The content of each course attends to the evolving aspects of leadership formation and development. The

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[6]   Kennon L. Callahan, *Effective Church Leadership: Building on the Twelve Keys* (New York: HarperCollins, 1990) 38.
[7]   Lovett H. Weems, Jr., *Church Leadership: Vision, Team, Culture and Integrity* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993) 34.

theological foundation for teaching leadership developed by the two instructors stems from a particular, theologically-based conviction. Leaders do not draw boundaries, but rather point toward God's limitless possibilities, such as redemption as the erasure of failure and transformation of the present into a new future. An emphasis on the notion of hospitality combined with a process ecclesiology undergirds the Church Leadership curriculum. God gifts everyone. Each one is called to honor these gifts and make space for their employment in an ever-evolving community of faith.[8] Students spend three or more years exploring the nature of these gifts in light of their call and their education. They also attend to questions about the nature and purpose of church, its organizational structures and potential processes by which the church evolves into a learning organization experiencing ongoing transformation.

The first course, "Church Leadership 100" (Introduction to Church Leadership), required for all professional degree students at MTSO, introduces formational and spiritual aspects of leadership as listed in the CL specialization objectives. The catalogue entry for CL 100 reads, "Leadership development as an evocative process will inform ministry in local communities and the wider church. Leadership theory and practice will be developed as a class."[9] This course, designed to be taken within the first two semesters of a student's seminary career, requires students to define leadership for themselves. They explore leadership issues through required reading and by means of conducting interviews of leaders whom they do or do not admire. Not only do students define leadership by listing characteristics and competencies, they work as a class to meet the first specialization objective, by forming their spiritual sense and theological understanding about what it means to lead an organization—often in crisis. To address the second CL specialization objective, a survey of administrative and managerial tasks accompanies formational work in the course. Denominational documents and church records shared among classmates introduce the necessity of record-keeping and organizational skill for the sake of the organization's functional cohesiveness.

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8   Paraphrased from an e-mail conversation with co-instructor, Bishop Judith Craig, MTSO, summer 2005.

9   2004-2005 Academic Catalogue, Methodist Theological School in Ohio, 54.

In CL 100, each 3-hour class period begins with a biblical text that becomes the foundational story for the day. The chosen pericope for the day exemplifies a principle of leadership in terms of connection or disconnection with God. This text weaves through both didactic and conversational processes in the classroom and sets the stage for theological reflection at the end of the class time together.

The primary text for CL 100, *Worlds Within a Congregation: Dealing with Theological Diversity,* frames the entire course. In this book, W. Paul Jones provides conclusions about theological variegation in congregations based on ten years of research. The interpretation of his findings demonstrates the theological differences and resulting disharmony that surface in areas of congregational concern: worship, education, mission statements, programs and preaching emphases. When students take the theological worlds inventory,[10] they find that they are compelled to learn different theological languages when speaking to classroom peers. This skill develops into an understanding that theological assumptions in congregations often guide the work of the church. Once students can articulate the language of their *worlds* and listen to the worlds of others, they begin to translate meaning and context in new ways. Each semester, students indicate that they understand now why worship wars and arguments about program priorities break out in their churches: priorities of the worlds differ. They also develop sophisticated notions of how diversity can create a holistic church by giving attention to various avenues of theological and practical interests of parishioners. This process of learning and reflection results in what Thomas Frank describes as the ability of leaders to see "how their own 'leadership' grows out of an organization's communal heritage and values as it seeks to extend its purposes into current situations."[11] Learning objectives three and five for the CL specialization, attention to flexibility and relationship dynamics in the church, manifest themselves in class work with theological worlds.

Study based on the framework of theological worlds yields a deep understanding of what it means to be a leader

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[10] W. Paul Jones, *Worlds Within a Congregation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000) chapter 4.

[11] Thomas Edward Frank, "The Discourse of Leadership and the Practice of Administration," *Journal of Religious Leadership* 1:1 (Spring 2002) 16.

for transformation. The leader who encourages paths to transformation learns about the nature of the church and its need for a hermeneutic of evolution. Instructors plant the seeds for addressing objective four, "to construct models for church development and renewal," in this introductory course, with an invitation to do further work in an advanced course, "Church Growth with Integrity."

Other texts included in CL 100 supplement the worlds material by encouraging students to name necessary competencies and by studying organizational systems as learning communities, dynamics of change, levels of maturity and self-differentiation, and motivation toward excellence in the realm of leadership.[12] The course structure, complete with role plays and simulations, also includes emphasis on the nature of the healthy and creative spirit in a leader, particularly in times of transition.

Role play yields a different issue. There is a clear tendency to describe leaders with value-charged terms such as disciple-making leaders, servant leaders, inspirational leaders, change-agent leaders. All these descriptors demonstrate a particular prescriptive role for leaders. Class participants engage in deconstructing typologies and reconstructing descriptions for leadership that encompass flexible, contextual aspects with an eye toward transformation.

One benefit of CL 100's course integration is noticed seminary wide. Faculty colleagues regularly report that students refer to these worlds throughout their theological education, particularly in theology, ethics and worship courses. One worship professor and one theology professor specifically address the issue of theological worlds in their own classes, based on the work students complete in CL 100.[13]

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[12] List of texts for CL100: W. Paul Jones, *Worlds Within a Congregation* (Abingdon Press, 2000); Eric H. F. Law, *Sacred Acts, Holy Change* (Chalice Press, 2002); Anthony B. Robinson, *Transforming Congregational Culture* (Eerdmans, 2003); Robert Kegan and Lisa Laskow Lahey, *How the Way We Talk Can Change the Way We Work* (Jossey-Bass, 2001); Jim Collins, *Good to Great* (Harper Business, 2001); Gilbert Rendle, *Leading Change in the Congregation* (Alban Institute, 1998); and Mark Lau Branson, *Memories, Hopes and Conversations: Appreciative Inquiry and Congregational Change* (Alban Institute, 2004).

[13] Dr. Sarah Lancaster (Associate Professor of Theology) and Dr. Robin Knowles Wallace (Associate Professor of Worship and Music) both have begun to refer to Jones's work in response to student conversation in their introductory courses.

At the end of the introductory course, all students review the objectives of the course and name what they still need to learn in their theological education. Finally, students spend time evaluating the content of the course, their own growth and the impact their peers have made on them. The final paper requires students to define leadership for themselves and for their future work in the ministry based on the learning they have begun in CL 100.

The second course in MTSO's church leadership curriculum, "Church Growth with Integrity" (CL 200), provides a specific study of the church growth movement. With the prerequisite CL 100 in mind, CL 200 challenges the church growth movement espoused by churches and denominations that hope for a *quick fix* when addressing mainline decline. This class critiques both the methodology and theology of popular church growth models. A theology of church growth develops throughout the term, based on attention to the early church movement, denominational foci, church visitation, qualitative and quantitative research, and then followed by group interpretation and synthesis of information. The course culminates in a publicly-presented class project that designs a theologically and spiritually-based church growth process. Denominational leaders receive invitations and travel from Ohio and surrounding states to attend.

"Church Growth with Integrity" adopts a pedagogy resembling a Ph.D. group seminar format. Part of the assigned project includes naming a biblical text to define the class members' corporate understanding of church growth, based on discussion of individuals' theological world emphases. The emergence of the biblical foundation often takes several weeks of theological discourse, due to varied theological perspectives on the purpose of church. When class members ultimately choose the text, they begin each class period with theological discussion about how this foundational message relates to course work from week-to-week, as their project develops.

Students conduct semester-long research on the current church growth market. CL 200 requires students to survey and critique the focus of the church growth market, by delving

into twenty to thirty of the millions of websites[14] offering packages for church redevelopment and attendance increases. Once they analyze the emphasis of the market, they face the assignment of providing a different understanding of church growth to anxious congregations and denominations. They construct an argument together for churches to engage in a process ecclesiology, the ongoing renewal of the church's relationship with self and world. Students develop their rubric for process ecclesiology based on introductory work in process theology in the course and interviews with leaders of growing congregations. Class members close the course by redefining the prevailing notion of church growth and offering a process ecclesiology that leads churches to engage their own contexts and interests.

Discussions about diversity from CL 100 continue to frame education about church leadership in the midst of transformational change, learning organizations and church growth analysis. Texts in the CL200 course focus on relationship-building and theological education for congregations. They do not focus on growth-by-number.[15]

In spring 2005, two students developed an instrument to help congregations name their tendencies and assumptions about themselves before engaging in the work of renewal. The most recent public presentation required at the end of the course resulted in one denominational leader in the audience requesting access to the instrument developed by students. Through public knowledge sharing, students learn that their work in the course is relevant for today's church. They also discover that their process for learning can be used in church settings where they attend or where they have leadership roles.

The CL200 course closes with critique similar to CL 100. Students pay particular attention to their personal and group responses to the course process of developing a project together. The instructor asks class members to describe their

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[14] A *Google* search for "church growth" yielded 1.7 million hits in spring 2005.

[15] Texts used in the CL 200 course: Jill M. Hudson., *When Better Isn't Enough* (Alban Institute, 2004); Luther K. Snow, *The Power of Asset Mapping* (Alban Institute, 2004); Howard E. Friend, Jr., *Recovering the Sacred Center* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1998); Mark A. Olson, *Moving Beyond Church Growth* (Minneapolis: Augsburg-Fortress Press, 2002); Gil Rendle and Alice Mann, *Holy Conversations* (Alban Institute, 2003); and George G. Hunter, Radical Outreach (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003).

own points of learning and what information, skills and presence they will take to their church settings as a result. Written and oral critiques include feedback on course texts and instructor effectiveness based on the five objectives listed for the CL specialization above.

The third course in the CL specialization, "Conflict Management" (CL 250), addresses major church issues as one component of leadership. This course aids students in learning the distinction between their personal and public roles and in clarifying assumptions and behaviors involved with conflict. CL250 empowers students to face their own fears about conflict, assess their styles and analyze potential unspoken issues arising in congregations during times of change. Spontaneous role play, case studies, and simulations address the means by which some conflict can be solved and some only can be managed. Basic mediation skills presented by a trained mediator supplement the texts required for the course. Students learn about toxic organizational systems, polarity management, signs of resistance to change, and power differentials. Texts reinforce the importance of knowing one's self before attempting to lead congregations through controversy.[16]

Students encountering this advanced course bring their theological world views from CL 100 and gain knowledge of their conflict management styles as well. Identifying theological focus in conjunction with natural behavior when under pressure teaches class participants about self-management and pastoral care of others. Students also learn that, in any change process, there is room for chaos and discontent. Classes teach participants to become teachers themselves in their contexts, working with people to understand acute (versus chronic) conflict as a natural part of a change cycle. Finally, discussion about toxic organizations and chronic conflict in its various forms moves students from the discussion of personal competency to organizational leadership competency.

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[16] Texts for CL 250: Richard Farson, *Management of the Absurd* (New York: Touchstone/ Simon & Schuster, 1996); Edwin H. Friedman, *Friedman's Fables* (New York: Guildford Press, 1990); Ronald W. Richardson, *Family Ties That Bind* (Bellingham, WA: Self-Counsel Press, 1995); Larry C. Spears, ed., *Insights on Leadership* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1998); and Speed B. Leas, *Discover Your Conflict Management Style* (Alban Institute, 1992).

The five objectives from the CL specialization list provide the focus for CL 250. The first, creating a theological and spiritual framework for conflict management helps students understand that conflict occurs naturally in any organization. Biblical reference to conflict, with one class period spent on theodicy issues, creates a method for students to link conflict with reflective practice on a regular basis. Next, objectives two and three manifest themselves in learning practical aspects of leadership related to conflict management. The course also underscores the value of flexibility contributing to students' ability to survive, if not thrive, in crisis or chaos. Finally, objectives four and five are demonstrated as students practice modeling healthy relationships in the midst of conflict. This discipline helps to create thereby an atmosphere for renewal rather than feeding the church's entrenchment in toxicity.

As in the first two courses, CL 250 closes with critique of objectives and skill sets learned and modeled through role play in the course. Interviews with peers and organizational leaders supplement the texts for creative learning. Conversation at the end of the semester allows students to respond to reading material and coursework directly with the professor; this practice serves to model how constructive criticism can make a positive impact on the future of the course.

The final course required for the CL specialization draws together the first three emphases and calls students to become transformational leaders. CL 300, "Leading Transformational Change," engages students in critical reflection about the meaning and impact of leadership for the church.[17] This course looks at the biblical, historical and theological perspectives of transformational change for church and community. Students move beyond general leadership principles concerning guiding change and into deeper issues of discerning where transformation is required for faithful Christian living. Students articulate distinctions between change and transformation, name the relationship between strategic and transformational leadership, and describe

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[17] Texts for CL 300: Jim Kitchens, *The Postmodern Parish* (Alban Institute, 2003); Gary Wills, *Certain Trumpets* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994); Daniel Goleman, *Primal Leadership* (Harvard Business School Press, 2002); and William Chris Hobgood, *The Once and Future Pastor* (Alban Institute, 1998).

models of transformational leadership. They engage the question of how congregations learn what they need rather than what they desire.

Students complete the course by developing two workbooks outlining a year of transformational work, one for the congregational leader and one for parishioners. These workbooks must be designed with a specific congregational setting in mind, with a description of context (size, demographics, socioeconomic situation, issues present) and a desired outcome description. Both the congregational leader's notebook and the parishioners' notebook provide a monthly guide for spiritual disciplines, personal care, reading and activity. The project also includes an assessment tool by which the student must demonstrate how the congregational leader and parishioners know that they have reached their goal. The five objectives for church leadership manifest themselves implicitly in the workbook assignment.

Students must choose an additional course to complete the CL specialization. MTSO offers a list of acceptable classes: "Group Life" or "Educating for Peace and Justice," (Christian Education Department), "Ethical Issues in the Practice of Ministry" (Theology/Ethics Department), or "Family Systems" (Pastoral Care Department). Each department integrates these courses with the Church Leadership curriculum through discussion or final projects when students indicate their specialization. The purpose for requiring a final course in a different field manifests itself in students' ability to integrate understandings of leadership with a broader sense of theological praxis.

Finally, each student pursuing a specialization in Church Leadership must complete a senior thesis project. An example of one project completed in spring 2005 shows how the tool, Appreciative Inquiry, can be used in the development of a process ecclesiology in the Emerging Church movement. Another project integrated the study of developing a narrative theology through worship in the rural church for the purpose of church renewal. Each project proposed must indicate an integration of Church Leadership curricula with another field of study found in the student's theological education. Thus, CL specialization by a student's senior year emphasizes praxis of ministry based on the breadth and depth of years of

seminary education.

Critique of each course in the CL curriculum occurs every year by the two instructors, based on student feedback and attention to newly-released texts and seminars. Both instructors confer annually over syllabus amendments for each course based on feedback, while keeping in place the five learning objectives and pedagogical focus on the didactic/dialectic method. Written critique adds to this overall assessment. In addition, comparison of syllabi in the CL curriculum with the Field Education courses allows further integration of leadership in the praxis of ministry. Field Education incorporates concepts learned in CL 100 and combines them with case study work, so that student reflection on ministry integrates core understandings of leadership.

"Why do I have to take a course in Church Leadership? I have been a leader in my church for years." This challenge continues to shape the Church Leadership curriculum at MTSO. Theological reflection and spiritual formation of leaders certainly can occur within the church setting. However, theological education provides an integrated, rigorous ethic of inquiry and a learning community for leadership development like no other place can provide. MTSO's mission, equipping the people of God for leadership and ministry in the church and in the world, creates an ethos of challenge and formation for people responding to God's call.