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 that are instituted while a religious leader is in their first position following formal schooling. These groups have certain characteristics which allow for personal growth and discovery allowing individuals to lead with integrity and imagination in new and unique contexts while being faithful to their calling as a religious leader.

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Rosetta's Story
A pastor in her first call encountered serious difficulties and left the congregation with no severance package. What began as relatively minor skirmishes with church leaders in her small town congregation in the rural mid-west 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 members of her congregation. The content of the issues raised by church members during the escalating conflict hardly matters. Conflicts usually arise from some factual quirk in the pastor's manner or practice.[1] The outcomes are fairly common.[2] Basing her approach on her seminary theoretical knowledge, 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 finally called in, the situation had become highly polarized and anger had reached a tipping point.

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[1] Edwin Friedman (*Generation to Generation*, New York: Guilford Press, 1985, 204) points to the distinction between content and process when the focus is on the clergy, calling most of the conflicts "red herrings."

[2] Rosetta's story is fictional, based on conversations with pastors in the Synod of Living Waters First Call Program which David led from 2002-2005.

Neither the congregational members, Rosetta, nor the denominational leaders had the perspective or ability to restore a sense of calm and reconciliation in the congregation. The conflict continued to escalate until Rosetta decided she could not continue in the situation and walked away. The fallout from this conflict lingered with the congregation for years and left Rosetta in a position where she was not able to consider serving another congregation. Subsequently she left ministry altogether.

Rosetta had been one of the bright and promising graduates of her seminary. After graduation, she had been called to serve a congregation that was in transition, but seemed to have a good track record with ministry and mission. However, the congregation had not previously received a person in their first call and did not value continuing education for the pastor. For five years she had labored without support, without mentoring or coaching, without anyone to give her feedback on her practices of leadership.

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[3], 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 class room and field education settings has exploded as well. Daniel Aleshire of the Association of Theological Schools has outlined the development of professional education in North American seminaries. He has also defined the inadequacies of preparing leaders for the challenges and opportunities that they will face in their particular ministry settings.[4] 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.[5]

Tom Frank lays out this idea in his article in the Spring 2002 Journal of Religious Leadership. Frank differentiates leadership from administration, arguing that administration is the more appropriate view of religious leadership. He does this because the larger cultural expectations of leadership tend to move the practice of leading a congregation away from discernment and collaboration and toward an articulated vision

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[3] See David H. Kelsey, *Between Athens and Berlin: The Theological Education Debate.* Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2011. and Edward Farley, *Practicing Gospel.* Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2003.

[4] Daniel Aleshire, *Earthen Vessels: Reflections on the Work and Future of Theological Schools* Grand Rapids: William Eerdmans, 2008. These deficiencies are also described in Charles Foster et al., *Educating Clergy: Teaching Practices and Pastoral Imagination.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass a Wiley Imprint, 2006., p 151.

[5] In this article the terms "leader" and "leadership" will be used to designate ministerial roles. We are suggesting that ministry formation is aimed primarily toward religious leadership, and that the chief work of congregational ministry is to be a leader.

which is often discontinuous from the past and presented and implemented by an individual or small group.[6] He continues to point out that this administration is a creative enterprise that requires attention to the past, the constraints of the community, and a sense of inquiry into the mission that the congregation has in the current moment, all working together to bring forth a new reality.[7] For the purposes of this paper, recognizing that religious leadership is used more commonly for the practice we are discussing, we have chosen to continue using the language of religious leadership rather than administration, understanding that Frank's view of religious leadership as administration is the preferred mode of practice.

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 the assertion that religious leadership is an art form. 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. 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 religious 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. Donald Schön dramatically described this reality as the "swampy lowland" where the particular, current, and most important issues of leadership must be addressed anew.[8] The history of the particular religious community has a great deal of influence on what is expected from the leader(s) and also the parameters within 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 of the people who are interacting with the leader and the decisions made by the community of faith. This means that 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 assimilate on a regular basis . And the church situation continues to change in exponential ways. The gleanings from any seminary education, degree or

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[6] Frank, Thomas Edward. "The discourse of leadership and the practice of administration." *Journal of Religious Leadership* 1, no. 1 (March 1, 2002): p 27.

[7] Ibid. p 28

[8] Donald Schön, *Educating the Reflective Practitioner: The Design for Teaching and Learning in the Professions.* San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 1987. p 3.

singular continuing education event, will eventually reach their limits and no longer suffice for the new and emerging concerns of church and society.[9]

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, the faith community, and the context are in a constant state of 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. Richard Hester and Kelli Walker-Jones illustrate how frequently members of their peer-learning groups had to search through their own and their churches' stories to find new solutions to difficult situations.[10] Adaptation is a constant need because the changing circumstances will not allow the same results time and time again.

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 each 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 to be able to move 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. It is now clear that with rapid social changes, an explosion of research-based knowledge, and ongoing technological innovations, many continuing education leaders now understand the need to prepare people for forty years of professional practice through lifelong learning experiences. [11]

Those engaging in professional ministry for the first time are in particular need of continual learning. The information imparted within formal 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. Even the benefits of field education are not adequate because the student

[9] 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., p 279.

[10] Richard Hester and Kelli Walker-Jones, *Know Your Story and Lead with It.* Herndon, VA: Alban, 2009.

[11] Ronald Cervero, "Building Systems of Continuing Education for the Professions," in Reber and Roberts, eds, *A Lifelong Call to Learn.* Herndon, VA: Alban, 2010., p 42.

minister is not fully responsible for the situation The way that one implements the material, as mentioned earlier, also depends upon the context of the ministry setting and that 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 in 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. Continual learning will be needed.[12] As opportunities and challenges are met, new situations requiring new leadership approaches 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.[13] 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 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

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[12] See: *Shifting Boundaries: Contextual Approaches to the Structure of Theological Education*, eds. Edward Farley and Barbara G. Wheeler. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press. 1991., p 53.

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

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.[14] 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[15]. 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 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. Interventions from outside the situation have the challenge of getting lost in translation since the local culture may not easily adsorb the ideas because of different experiences or modes of being.

Additionally, the wisdom of individuals and leaders within a system regarding actions within that context will usually surpass that of an outside expert who is bringing their assumptions from other 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

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

[15] Raabe, Paul R. "The scandal of particularity." *Concordia Journal* 28, no. 1 (January 1, 2002): p 8.

implementation and success. The underlying wisdom of this kind of organic and collaborative leadership is that "all of us are smarter than any of us."[16]

This emphasis on organic local solutions 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 which 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 configurations 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 has been the support group which forms for 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[17] 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[18]. Furthermore, the learning needed is not simply the

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[16] Landon Whitsitt, *Open Source Church.* Herndon, VA: Alban, 2011., p 70

[17] Knowles, Malcolm S., Richard A. Swanson, and Elwood F. Holton III. The Adult Learner, Seventh Edition: The definitive classic in adult education and human resource development. Burlington ME: Elsevier, 2011.

[18] Besides adult learning theory, this notion also reflects the concepts of ministerial formation as opposed to training referred to in both Kelsey (Ibid.) and Farley (Ibid.).

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.[19] 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[20]. First on the agenda should be a covenant agreement which integrates the group objectives, clarifies the leadership roles in the group, and 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 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. Peer group research indicates that groups are helpful to the participants and to their congregations when they led byThose who have used grant money to organize and research these group have run groups 1) a strong leader/teacher who helps to structure the time, 2) a mentor or guide who stands by to assist but does not directly lead, and 3) shared peer 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.

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 which can easily be adapted for peer learning groups outside a seminary setting, and which David has used extensively in other small group learning experiences among clergy.[21]

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[19] 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.

[20] For group process background see: Johnson, David W., and Frank P. Johnson. *Joining Together: group theory and group skills*. Prentice Hall, 2012.

[21]These guidelines draw on the work of Christina Baldwin and Ann Linnea, T*he Circle Way: a leader in every chair* San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2010., and Parker Palmer, *A Hidden Wholeness*, Jossey Bass, 2009.

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.[22] 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 to 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"[23] 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.[24]

What do peer learning groups do? Activities and processes of peer-learning group life were described in the research of Maykus and Marler:

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[22] Ibid.

[23] Conversation with Richard Hester, October, 2011, Louisville KY.

[24] For an accessible source for this process see, Andrew Lester, *Hope in Pastoral Care and Counseling.* Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1995.

"the majority of SPE [Sustaining Pastoral Excellence] peer group practices include sharing personal concerns (83%), enjoying fellowship (80%), and sharing and getting feedback about ministry problems (80%). Personal and ministry support and fellowship are therefore key components of SPE peer group experience. Praying for each other (69%), discussing a common topic (69%), and exploring new approaches to ministry (54%) are also important. It is interesting that a wide variety of intentional spiritual, experiential, and intellectual practices are also either key or minor emphases in over half of SPE pastoral leader peer groups. Groups meet with experts, travel together, engage in a discipline of silence or meditation, utilize case studies, and express their spirituality through art, drama, and literature."[25]

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. Hester and Walker-Jones offer this list of observed behaviors from their work with a Lilly supported SPE peer learning group research project of six years' duration. Members of this group:

- "Define themselves and stay connected to those who oppose them.
- Negotiate difficult situations with confidence and they drew on their story and the story of their congregation.
- Risk leading with curiosity and a not-knowing position even when anxious voices pressured them to be knowers.
- Make clear covenants about how to work together and to hold confidences.
- Embrace Sabbath time for themselves and their congregations.
- Draw on the wisdom of their clergy group by calling on each other individually for consultation and by continuing to participate in a narrative clergy group long after their initial two-year experience.
- Become advocates for justice as a mission of the congregation and as a quality of congregational life.
- Dispel anxiety with playfulness and laughter."[26]

From our own reflection on this process, 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?[27]

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[25]Maykus, Janet, and Penny Marler, "Is the Treatment the Cure? A Study of the Effects of Participation in Pastoral Leader Peer Groups," Austin Presbyterian Seminary, 2010, p 19.

[26] Hester and Walker Jones, p 136.

[27] David Sawyer, *Hope in Conflict,* Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2007, p 103.

Peer Learning Groups for First Call and Later Career Ministers

Most of the peer learning groups studied by Bruce Roberts in *A Lifelong Call to Learn*[28] were aimed at mid-career ministers, although not exclusively. 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. No other program has yet been initiated to set graduates off into their ministry with the help and learning of their peers. A lifelong learning launch pad 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 launch pad 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 launch pad 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.

There are clearly some situations where peer learning groups are not appropriate. In order for a peer learning group to function well, it is necessary for all participants to both embrace the covenant to which the group has agreed and be able to fulfill the obligation to honor the covenant. There are individuals for whom this requirement is difficult, if not impossible, because of mental health or other life issues which make them unable to engage openly in this process, honoring others' needs and sharing themselves appropriately. Including such individuals in a peer learning group would be disastrous both for them and the rest of the group since the necessary trust and mutuality would be unable to form, creating the holding environment necessary to engender the desired learning.

Another danger in the group process is the development of over-closeness and the desire to avoid rocking the boat in the group. It can lead to a phenomenon known as group-think, in which members withhold their judgment about the values and ethics of particular strategies in order to make another member feel better. This is described in many works on group life.[29]

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

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[28] Reber and Roberts, 2010, See sections II and III.

[29] Johnson, David W. and Frank Johnson, *Coming Together* Prentice Hall, 2012.

who taught mid-career pastors have retired from the seminaries. But the knowledge base and the systemic changes for ministry are even more acute for these practitioners.

Following up on the concern for Rosetta's situation, research on peer learning groups has shown that people who have peer group support and encouragement are less likely to run into long-term trouble and less likely to end up leaving ministry.

"In summary, SPE peer groups that renew their members' ministries provide a *stimulating mix of the practical, the intellectual, and the spiritual* along with a certain amount of "holding each others' feet to the fire" in terms of *accountability*. As with most peer-learning approaches, the wisdom and experience of the group itself is a key resource as is a good facilitator or leader. Peer group participants share ideas, trouble-shoot ministry problems, and provide pastoral feedback. They also explore new ideas and approaches to ministry. A balance is evident here: the kind of group that renews a pastoral leader's ministry appears to be about half, *personal support,* and about half, *ministry enrichment.*"[30]

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[30] Maykus and Marler, p 24. Emphasis by Maykus and Marler.

Two Illustrative Narratives
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 the 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[31] 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.[32] 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. They realized in their final dinner together that they had failed to make arrangements to hold each other accountable for leadership. They realized that if only they had taken turns being the "leader" of the group, more productive learning could have happened over the two year period of time. 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 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 and serving in very different ministry settings. All of the members had had some employment experience prior to attending seminary with some being definitively second

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[31] See the Austin Seminary College of Pastoral Leaders website at: http://www.austinseminary.edu/page.cfm?p=278

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

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 more married individuals than single. The original facilitator was a male member of the judiciary 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 learning, 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 location.

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 judiciary, some as chairs of committees, one being elected as vice moderator of the judiciary, 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, developed by the committee of the judiciary responsible for congregation and pastoral relations, 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 ongoing 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.

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