
FALTERING STEPS: IMAGINING OUR WAY ACROSS THE SEMINARY-CHURCH DIVIDE

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Abstract

Seminary graduates still report a gap between their preparation in school and their readiness for ministry in practice. This essay seeks to understand the gap through the work of Patricia Benner, who examines how the context of school limits preparation. It also uses the work of William Sullivan, who addresses three apprenticeships of professional formation, the third one being professional identity, which fully occurs only in practice. It proposes bridging the gap between school and practice with a pedagogical approach using imaginative texts, novels, and memoirs by or about pastors that seed the pastoral imagination for subsequent growth.

What Is the Problem?

A few years ago, I led a discussion at Lilly Endowment's Pastoral Excellence Network on what we are learning about the formation of pastoral leadership. One way of approaching this issue, and the perspective that quickly emerged during our discussion, is to point to the perceived inadequacy of seminary education for congregational ministry. This approach usually results in challenges about how we teach for ministry.

Judging by the number of blogs, online comments, and conversations with graduates, seminary colleagues, and prospective students, the seminary-church divide is a topic of unending interest. In a nutshell, the discussion has two themes: (1) seminary is too theoretical and

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impractical for real ministry, and (2) ministers are too pragmatic, have stopped reading, and have left their education behind. We've heard this lament for decades.

In 1961, Joseph Sittler wrote:

What the schools elevate the actual practice of ministry flattens. The schools urge to competence in the various fields of theological study.... Visit the man (*sic*) some years later in what the man still calls inexactly his study and one is more than likely to find him accompanied by the same volumes he took with him from his student room. And filed on top of even these are mementos of what he is presently concerned with: a roll of blueprints, a file of negotiations between the parish, the bank, and the Board of Missions, samples of asphalt tile, and a plumber's estimate.¹

In the early 1980s, Edward Farley, in his critique of the "clerical paradigm," commented:

The present ethos of the Protestant churches is such that a theologically oriented approach to the preparation of ministers is not only irrelevant but counterproductive. When we consider what makes ministers upwardly mobile, we suspect that the reward system for professional promotion and success is largely a matter of un- or anti-theological skills.²

From the other side of the great divide, some church leadership experts are dubious of the idea that theological considerations ought to be much of a concern for pastoral leadership. I once asked a prominent consultant/author and a group of pastors: What difference does theology make in your planning and

¹ Joseph Sittler, "Maceration of the Minister" (originally published 1961), <http://www.religion-online.org/book-chapter/chapter-5-maceration-of-the-minister/>, accessed March 17, 2018.

² Edward Farley, *Theologia. The Fragmentation and Unity of Theological Education* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 4. This has been an influential text, but Farley has repudiated many of his conclusions in "Four Pedagogical Mistakes: A *Mea Culpa*," in *Teaching Theology and Religion* 8(4) (2005): 200–203.

programming? The author/consultant laughed: “I think we all can guess that this question is coming from a seminary professor. We don’t have the luxury for it. We are dealing with the real world.”³

Daniel Aleshire, recently retired as president of the Association of Theological Schools, spoke about the differences between the worlds of school and church in his pastoral experience with more humor and less negativity:

I remember about four months into the pastorate of Bergen Baptist Church in northern New Jersey that the semester didn’t end, the congregation didn’t change, there were no grades, and the work was not going to start fresh next week. Higher education is an environment where life comes in four-month blocks. I could stick out a professor that I didn’t like because I knew the course would end. All the work came to a certain and clean stop every four months. There was a clear indication of achievement at the end of the four months in the form of grades. And after a short break, everything started fresh: new professors, new courses, all with limited carryover from the previous semester.... In the congregation, the people didn’t change every four months. My first Sunday, a somewhat troubled member of the congregation (about whom I had been counseled) was the first to greet me at the door after the service and told me my sermon was “the worst damn sermon” he had ever heard.... Four months later, this man was still there and not much more impressed by my preaching. And other than him, the grades the congregation gave

³ This comment will remain anonymous. Another milder comment comes from author/consultant Gil Rendle: “I am still struck by how few seminaries even acknowledge leadership as a discipline and don’t address it in any way, or address it only in tangential ways.” Gil Rendle, “Leadership Means Pushing People to Purpose,” <https://www.faithandleadership.com/gil-rendle-leadership-means-pushing-people-purpose>, accessed March 22, 2018.

were so ambiguous that I was never sure how I was doing. In the fifth month, nothing was all that new.⁴

People on both sides perceive a gulf between educational preparation and the practices of leadership in ministry in the churches. This problem is not limited to education for ministry. The classic expression of the theory-practice divide emerges in other professional schools, as well. Lawyers complain about their impractical law education; teachers complain about their teaching programs. The problem might be less acute in music or medical education where *practicing* is so much more a focus of the extended educational experience than music theory. But ministry and education for ministry, especially in leadership, is our concern. A connection that once might have been intimate and vital seems to have broken. How do we understand the relationship of education for ministry to practice in congregations? How are we thinking about the gap, and how might that thinking influence our practices of teaching for ministry? That is the focus of this paper.

The next section discusses two resources that help me make sense of the continuities and discontinuities between theology and practice, between classroom and church, and a different way we might relate these contexts in the formation of good pastors.⁵

⁴Daniel Aleshire, "Thoughts on the Transition into Ministry Program," unpublished remarks, February 2005, to the gathering of the Lilly Endowment Transition into Ministry Initiative Programs, Indianapolis, Indiana.

⁵ For fifteen years, I worked as a solo pastor. For twenty-two years, I have worked with ministry students. My theological education at first seemed to prepare me hardly at all, and I scrambled to learn to survive. It irritated me. Then, at some point, my inner compass changed. Now I see the need for a whole range of learning, in school and, later, in the church. Because of my formation, I'm oriented toward action more than scholarship. So, I'm looking primarily to glean insights for our teaching practice and see this paper as primarily pedagogical.

What We Can and Cannot Learn in the Classroom

I teach leadership in ministry in an ecumenical, mostly mainline Protestant, Divinity School that is attached to a research university. Inevitably that context shapes my work and life, as does any specific theological context. In my location, we seem to recognize the gap between education and practice in some ways and have addressed it with varied degrees of effectiveness. The gap is likely more severe where I teach. Other theological schools have remained closer to the church or attract more students who are already doing ministry. Students here trend younger and less experienced; the practice of ministry in congregations often scares them. However, even with different contexts, we all continue to perceive a gap between classroom and practice and try to bridge it in our own ways.

Most schools include an important practical section in their curriculum. In part it happens in coursework, such as preaching or leadership classes. In part it happens in an experiential/reflective component that involves practice, case studies, conversation, and assessment. Most of us do something similar.

Many schools or judicatories also have seen the need for more practical training and formation than the schools provide and require candidates for ordination to take a unit of Clinical Pastoral Education outside the classroom. Some denominations require year-long, full-time congregational internships. Some seminaries are trying to move the classroom into the congregation. These efforts show recognition of a gap and the need to address it. Besides the theoretical, we acknowledge the need for the practical, where we often talk about how to apply the theoretical concepts we have learned. Still, our students report, it isn't enough.

Is there something inherently limiting to the classroom context and the learning that happens there? The work of Patricia Benner suggests that there is.

Building on learning research by Hubert and Stuart Dreyfus, Benner has studied growth toward practical

expertise in nurses. Chris Scharen draws on Benner to understand growth in ministry, as well.⁶ Expertise, for nursing or ministry, requires experience and time to develop. Benner identifies and names stages through which nurses (and by extension other professionals) pass: novice, advanced beginner, competence, proficiency, intuitive expertise. Each stage exhibits common characteristics; novices, for example, rely in new situations on rules or step-by-step instructions, while the expert seems to simply understand and act.⁷ Scharen traces similar stages in the experience of new pastors in the first years of ministry. It is a helpful way to understand the vast and critical learning that happens after formal schooling ends.⁸

Of importance to my question about the gap between school and ministry is a more fundamental approach and set of claims about professional practices. Benner is working against an understanding of professional expertise that she calls the “rational-technical”:

The rational-technical vision of performance is that of a practitioner or technical expert developing mastery of a body of knowledge and applying that knowledge in prespecified ways for prespecified outcomes.⁹

⁶ See Christian Scharen, “Learning Ministry over Time: Embodying Practical Wisdom,” *For Life Abundant: Practical Theology, Theological Education, and Christian Ministry* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2008), 265–288.

⁷ This radio/podcast interview with a dialysis nurse captures the power of intuitive expertise: “Design for the Real World: Dialysis Machine,” *Studio 360*, <https://www.wnyc.org/story/209610-design-real-world-dialysis-machine/>, accessed March 22, 2018.

⁸ Christian Scharen and coauthor Eileen Campbell-Reid codirect the Learning Pastoral Imagination Project. They are studying the development over time of a cohort of fifty pastors. See “Learning Pastoral Imagination: A Five-Year Report on How New Ministers Learn in Practice,” *Auburn Studies* 21 (Winter, 2016), <https://auburnseminary.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/Learning-Pastoral-Imagination.pdf>.

⁹ Patricia Benner, “Using the Dreyfus Model of Skill Acquisition to Describe and Interpret Skill Acquisition and Clinical Judgment in Nursing Practice and Education,” *Bulletin of Science, Technology & Society* 24(3) (2004): 188–199. This article will be excerpted extensively because it is highly descriptive.

But this understanding, she argues, is inadequate to understanding how a professional functions and grows in expertise over time, in actual work with people, institutions, and contexts. Benner points out that the rational-technical vision ignores three crucial aspects of the work professionals do: that it is engaged, situated, and complex.

When Benner describes the work of professionals as “engaged,” she uses such language for that work as “experiential,” “attuned to the situation,” “response-based,” and “open to experiential learning and reading changes.” The engaged professional “learns to hold his or her background understandings in a fluid or semipermeable way.” Engagement demands “recognizing the unexpected” with “openness and responsiveness.” Engagement is involvement and humility, not mastery; it cannot be a stance of detached observation or disinterested application of rules.

When Benner discusses the work of professionals as “situated,” she describes a work environment as “an instance of particular concern” or “the situation at hand,” rather than a generalized setting. The situation in which such work occurs is “undetermined (i.e., open to variations not accounted for by science),” “contingent” “dynamic,” “fast-paced, open-ended,” “unexpected,” and “meaningful, intelligible, but changing.” Its particularity and fluidity are key.

When Benner discusses the work of professionals as “complex,” she talks of the difference between *techne* and *phronesis*:

Techne, or the activity of producing outcomes, is governed by a means-end rationality where the maker or producer governs the thing produced or made by gaining mastery over the means producing the outcomes.

Professional work, by contrast, is more *phronesis*. It “cannot rely solely on a means-end rationality because one’s acts are concerned for doing good in particular circumstances, where being in relationship and discerning

particular human concerns are (sic) at stake must guide action.”

The complexity is *experiential*: one’s perceptions and actions change in response to prior actions and their impact on the environment. The complexity is *relational*, as it engages other humans and their varied responses. The complexity is *moral*, as it involves not just application of principles or rules, but discernment of a variety of goods present in any human interaction. The complexity is *developmental*, over time, as one gets better at the work.

Benner’s approach helps us to look at ministry, which also exceeds the “rational-technical model.” A minister enters a scene with intent to act. But it is not simple or straightforward to determine what to do or say. The situation exceeds the predetermined application of a technique, theory, or practice learned in school. Something must be done, but what?¹⁰ Professional work is situated, complex, and engaged.

Classic classroom teaching and learning tend toward the *abstracted, simplified, and disengaged*—in order to generalize, organize, and communicate a body of knowledge clearly and with care. It usually lacks the demand, disorder, uncertainty, and urgency of ministry. The classroom is appropriately calm and orderly. It focuses on the reflective, which is not a bad thing.

The classroom approach is most helpful in conveying a discipline or a set of techniques that is systematic and organized. However, this is clearly different from the situation of practice. It is not always a good container for the dynamic messiness of engagement, which requires numerous sophisticated interactions: readings and interpretation of a situation, weighing a range of options, choosing what seems most appropriate, attempts at competent and impactful actions, assessment of their

¹⁰ A fine example of this type of experience for a new chaplain is found at mag.uchicago.edu/law-policy-society/chaplains-compassion. I’ll point later to other examples from books that I use in a course, including episodes from memoirs such as *Open Secrets* and collections such as *This Odd and Wondrous Calling*.

effect, adjustments or refinements, and, continuing the interpretive/active cycle, potential new readings, decisions, and action.

It is no wonder, then, that it takes doing hands-on ministry over an extended period to hone the capacity to see, understand, and act wisely and well. It is not simply a matter of learning theory and applying it. Growth toward expertise takes reflective engagement in the complexities of a specific situation.

Benner helps me understand in a new way our intuitive recognition that ministers must learn crucial aspects of their craft on the job, immersed in doing the work of ministry. The classroom provides a good foundation for the practice of ministry, but significant aspects of doing ministry can be best learned—perhaps can only be learned—outside the classroom. “You don’t know what you need to know until you need to know it.” This is a kind of learning that more time, more content, and more nuance will not address.

Wise and mature practice requires a longer trajectory of learning than most professional education can offer (and more than most students can afford). The school can do its part exceedingly well, but it cannot do it all. Experience plays a critical role, and Benner presents good reasons for this. The classroom has benefits, but it has limits, as well. The school is different from the congregation.¹¹

If this description of the limits of the classroom in preparing students for ministry is accurate (and I think it is), then we might ask: What are the implications for our

¹¹ The classroom and the church differ in other important ways. The values, ethos, and characteristic practices important in one context are very different in the other, as Dan Aleshire pointed out, e.g., the question of plagiarism or borrowing/imitation in preaching. And even the calendar makes a difference: though finals week and Advent come at about the same time, ministers don’t start vacation on December 15. No wonder the transition from school into church can be so jarring. And no wonder that focusing on this critical early developmental stage of ministry can enable more pastors to thrive.

teaching? How do we make sense of a school curriculum in the face of discontinuity with the subsequent practice for which it is intended to prepare students? How can we prepare students more adequately for the move from one context to the next, so that they might fulfill the aim of theological education?¹²

Bridging the Gap Between School and Practice

Benner points to the importance of acknowledging how different learnings emerge from different contexts. William Sullivan of the Carnegie Foundation has written about the processes and seasons through which professionals mature. In focusing on the developing professional, he mitigates the sense of gap that Benner's context-attentive perspective accentuates. As important as it is to acknowledge the limits of our efforts in the classroom, it is also important to look for approaches that build continuity. Sullivan uses the concept of apprenticeships to describe growth toward wisdom and expertise in a way that is helpful to that end.

Sullivan says that all growing professionals serve three distinct apprenticeships. He describes them as “a cognitive or intellectual apprenticeship, a practical apprenticeship of skill, and an apprenticeship of identity formation.”¹³

The first apprenticeship, knowledge, is easy to recognize and widely accepted. We in the theological school give most of our attention to it. The school is the

¹² I do not intend to set up a straw man. I acknowledge that some classrooms are structured differently. Sharon Daloz Parks shows how Ronald Heifetz uses classroom teaching to embody adaptive challenges and responses within the class in *Leadership Can Be Taught* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2005).

Many of us use case study or other forms of experiential education or praxis. Others might experiment with importing role play, spiritual practices, or clearness committees. All are excellent ways of trying to get around the confines of the usual classroom. My proposal is a similar experiment.

¹³ See Sullivan's “Introduction” to *Educating Clergy: Teaching Practices and Pastoral Imagination* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006), 1–16; especially 5–8. This phrase comes from 5.

place of thinking, reading, library study, writing, examinations, and papers. Its curriculum offers education for ministry through the appropriate academic disciplines, with the teaching and learning of discrete and specialized subjects and methodologies: Bible, theology, church history, and ethics, usually presented in approximately that order. Ministry students are expected to become competent at some level in the knowledge basis of their profession, much as medical students must learn all the bones of the body. It is critical to the work ministers will do.

The second apprenticeship, that of skills particular to a profession, is also presented in the school, with more or less attention depending on the school. Here we are thinking about the central practices of ministry such as preaching, pastoral care, Christian education, or administration and leadership. This knowledge of skills is also critical for pastors, but because much must be learned in the praxis of doing, reflecting, and refining, the school often seeks more to prepare the way for later practical learning and competence. Just as books in these practical areas often appear further to the back of publishers' catalogs, it is often the case that these areas or disciplines are less centered in the curriculum.

Sullivan's third apprenticeship points to identity formation: the growing assimilation of the normative values or ethic that characterizes a distinctive profession and guides its practitioners, such that they know who they are and why they do what they do—and affirm it. The third apprenticeship shapes identity and values within the confrontation of the particular demands of engaging a set of practices over time. Repeating the everyday acts that are central to a profession, building on the profession's distinct knowledge base, mastering its expertise, assimilating its norms—these mold the values, outlook, and identity of a practitioner. A growing professional develops a distinctive way of being in and seeing the world and her or his role in it.

Such an apprenticeship occurs for new pastors as they begin to face congregational responsibilities fully: the weekly preparation and preaching, hospital and home visits, leading worship, allocating resources, managing time, working with volunteers or organizing activities in groups, dealing with accountability—all within a community rather than in solitude, with an aim of faithful life together.¹⁴

Instead of the disciplinary boundaries found in the school, ministry in practice is whole, seamless, and made up of distinct but not separated moments of attention to a range and variety of practices and tasks leading toward common ends or commitments. A preaching moment might serve pastoral or missional ends, as well as educate and inspire. Pastoral leadership is often shaped by concern for theological integrity, informed by scriptural and ethical dimensions, and offers teaching opportunities. A pastoral encounter often leads to a sermon or a focus in worship or research. The study becomes the office, the confessional, the sanctuary, and the classroom. Moral considerations, theological questioning, biblical and historical understanding, the contributions of the social sciences and the arts—all inform and guide and flow into ministry, but they serve a shared telos, not their separate ends.

Through the lens of differing apprenticeships, the school offers education in the critical theological knowledge base—the first necessary apprenticeship—and augments that knowledge with education and training in the skills for doing ministry. Field education helps with skills practice and brings with it the beginnings of a distinctive outlook growing out of actions and reflection, as well as from relationships with professionals in practice. Within our constraints—the limits of the classroom—we do first and second apprenticeship

¹⁴ Craig Dykstra uses the term *pastoral imagination* to describe what we see in “a good pastor at work.” See “Pastoral and Ecclesial Imagination,” *For Life Abundant: Practical Theology, Theological Education, and Christian Ministry* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2008), 41–61; especially the opening paragraph.

preparation well. But how do we prepare students for the third apprenticeship?

In reflecting on my own experience, it took five years of full-time pastoral work for me to grow into a sense of proficiency and self-identity and to gain an image of excellence by which I might measure myself. This resulted in the self-recognition that “I am a good minister.”¹⁵ The learning curve was steep and hard. So, it should not be surprising that our students talk about a gap between school and practice.

But Sullivan’s work suggests that we might do better to think less of disconnected experiences, during and after seminary, and instead consider a longer trajectory of formation involving all three apprenticeships. This trajectory begins before the season of seminary education with intimations of a call and moves through the moments of formal classroom learning during which students primarily serve the first apprenticeship. It continues into the second and third apprenticeships, as new pastors work and learn and do the tasks of ministry and are shaped by them as they advance toward wise practice and pastoral identity. (All of this should be undergirded by first apprenticeship knowledge.)

It is worth stressing again that school is valuable as a place for preparing students for ministry. Sullivan’s approach helps precisely because its focus moves us past the typical but misleading theory-practice dichotomy. All three apprenticeships are necessary for the development of expertise, wisdom, and excellence in ministry. They happen at different intensities, at different times, and in different contexts. Ministers flourish best when church and school work well together.

¹⁵ Matt Bloom talks about this process in terms of recognizing one’s “membership.” See Matt Bloom, “*Flourishing in Ministry: Emerging Research Insights on the Well-Being of Pastors*” (Notre Dame, Ind.: The Flourishing in Ministry Project, 2013), especially 34–41 on “membership” in “the community of pastors,” https://wellbeing.nd.edu/assets/198819/emerging_insights_2_1_.pdf, accessed March 24, 2018. Also see footnote 41.

That said, the seminary is still a time and place of preparation. Do we complete our usual work in knowledge and skills and send our students on their way to take their chances with developing pastoral identity, or is there something else that the seminary can do?

Sullivan suggests that a different pedagogy is needed for a different apprenticeship. Thus, my proposal centers on an attempt at such a pedagogy using the ways of imagination to prepare students for later growth, and I offer an example for that purpose.

A Modest Proposal—“Pastoral Lives: Novels and Memoirs of Ministry”

My questions: How do we pay attention *within* the school to fostering a kind of learning that happens primarily *outside* the school? How can we assist our students in moving successfully toward a mature pastoral identity?

My pedagogical experiment centers on trying to awaken the nascent pastoral identity and imagination by immersing students in narratives of ministry. It focuses on novels and films, essays, and memoirs by and about pastors. These narratives present the pastoral life as it is lived, in context. Students encounter, experience, and discuss being a pastor in a way that escapes some of the walls of the classroom and the typical approach of the theological curriculum. The goal of this approach is to prepare students for the growth of the third apprenticeship.

This approach has a number of advantages. This sort of learning experience seems less didactic and analytic than its cousin, the case study. Reading or watching the experiences over time of pastors engaged in the complexity of ministry draws our eyes to the integrity and wholeness of pastoral experience, rather than to the separate events or disciplines associated with study for ministry.

It is less direct and threatening than a personal case analysis. Students can read with investment, interest, and

empathy but without fear for their performance or their vocational and personal well-being. They can try on the role of pastor in ways that are not available to them otherwise, identify (for better or worse), and consider their actions.

It is anticipatory and open-ended. Reading a memorable narrative sows seeds for later growth. It can be driven by the concerns of students with little or no experience as they ponder how they might—or might not—want to do ministry in the complexity of human interaction with God and community. Bringing students into conversations with excellent pastor-authors exposes them to inevitable struggles with necessary competencies and the perspective on the world that wise or unwise pastors have developed. Students who have little experience can begin to feel their way into ministry.

Students who come to these texts with extensive ministry in their background will recognize and connect with the larger body of pastors. They will find within the classroom an affirmation of the kinds of experiences they have had—which might be mirrored in what they are reading in all its detail, sequence, and oddity—and the wisdom they might have gained that is not always present in the school. They will begin to make sense of their experiences in theological ways and to value that understanding.

Finally, these are just great reads. At a certain point, I decided that if I was going to teach a book, I had to love the book. If it had a powerful impact on me, it would likely have a powerful impact on students, as well.

As an example, I will describe a seminar in leadership that I teach at the Divinity School called “Pastoral Lives: Novels and Memoirs of Ministry.” In the syllabus, I begin by offering students the same rationale for this class that I have offered in this paper (the syllabus is on the Academy of Religious Leadership (ARL) website):

So how can we in the school more fully prepare for work as ministers? I suggest that, in the classroom setting, “third apprenticeship” aspects

can be best engaged imaginatively, through such means as storytelling among colleagues and friends, case studies with experienced mentors, and true narratives (fiction and memoir) of ministers' lives and experiences. *The pedagogy of this classroom-centered learning experience builds on this insight.*

There is a wonderful and rich body of writings for us to enjoy, enough to fill a year of classes. I have consulted widely with ministers and academic colleagues in gathering resources. I have also tried to take into account various diversities—race, gender, culture, tradition/denomination, demographics, rural-urban setting, geography. I am confident you will find these readings challenging, informative, generative of insight, and satisfying.

The class is a seminar with an enrollment target of twelve to fifteen. The format is simple. We read a book each week and meet once for three hours to discuss it with a short break in the middle of the meeting. In the first two hours, I try to focus conversation on the story. I invite students to lift up and discuss: What is going on? What episodes or events do you find striking, surprising, confounding? Why? In the second part, we try to think more theologically and personally: What do these readings mean for ministry as you understand it? How do they impact your sense of vocation? What theological connections or implications do you see? What learnings might you take away?

We usually begin with a student-led moment of prayer or a meditation in a wide variety of forms, and someone brings a snack. But mostly we sit and talk about books—this is a decidedly low-tech forum.

The course goals are stated: to focus on a text with an end in mind, that end being an encounter with the lived experience of being a pastor that can inform our becoming a pastor. Other goals are to expose students to this body of literature and thus to give them the blessing

of mentors (in the readings) and colleagues (their fellow students). Students write a three- to four-page reflection each week in preparation for the class, with the intent of mimicking the length and tone of a sermon. These short writings constitute half their grade, and the other half comes from attendance and participation in discussion. I am trying to locate the learning value not in a research paper, exam, or case that might reflect first or second apprenticeship values, but in the interaction of the group in conversation with the lived experience of ministry. I hope to emphasize the importance for ministers of a shared text (living or written), thoughtful reflection and questioning, and a common search for meaning and support in the company of colleagues. Another hope for the class is a nudge toward the realization that learning is not limited to the school. Indirectly, I am saying: “Of course, your academic preparation is only partial—see this complex, beautiful work you’re called to do?”

The heart of the class, of course, is in the readings. Amazing narratives have been written about ministers—memoirs, novels, essays, and films. The best choices illumine particular aspects of the pastoral life, especially those with an explicit focus on the development of a pastoral identity. It is difficult to choose the top thirteen for any given semester.

I often begin with *A Lesson Before Dying*¹⁶ by Ernest Gaines for its beautiful depiction of the formation of professional identity in an African American teacher in segregated Louisiana. A pastor is central to the story, but students often ask: “Who is more the minister here?” as the teacher struggles with his call to walk with an unjustly condemned man and ultimately helps awaken in the prisoner an awareness of his humanity before execution.

A number of readings depict what it is like to answer a call and begin work as a pastor. Best known might be

¹⁶ Ernest Gaines, *A Lesson Before Dying* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994).

Richard Lischer's *Open Secrets*.¹⁷ Students empathize with stories about forgetting to bring the elements to the hospital; or gathering church leaders to build a better team, asking them to share their hopes, only to hear "Well, I didn't vote for you, but I'm sure you'll be fine." I have also used *Good News from North Haven*,¹⁸ *This Odd and Wondrous Calling*,¹⁹ and *Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic*²⁰, all of which allow students to overhear what it is like to begin in parish ministry, or to be married and living in the parsonage, or to be learning to do many things in which you have little or no experience or training but are expected to be an expert. These readings allow students to see the learning of skills through trial and error and the process of identity formation at work.

Primary issues in forming pastoral identity also emerge in other readings that depict being a pastor as one alternative among others. Barbara Brown Taylor's *Leaving Church*²¹ is fascinating to students as well as challenging. It speaks a faith language many younger students understand and affirm but comes out in a different place than they hope when Taylor leaves her congregation. Eugene Peterson tells his own call story in *The Pastor*²² and gives a rich account of the theological depth he found and fostered within the life of his congregation. But another specific question his story raises is about how the pastor's role differs from that of a helping professional such as a counselor and how he turned from a therapeutic outlook to a theological view of his people. Students

¹⁷ Richard Lischer, *Open Secrets: A Spiritual Journey Through a Country Church* (New York: Doubleday, 2001).

¹⁸ Michael Lindvahl, *The Good News from North Haven: A Year in the Life of a Small Town* (New York: Doubleday, 1991).

¹⁹ Lillian Daniel and Martin B. Copenhaver, *This Odd and Wondrous Calling: The Public and Private Lives of Two Ministers* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2009).

²⁰ Reinhold Niebuhr, *Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980).

²¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, *Leaving Church: A Memoir of Faith* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006).

²² Eugene Peterson, *The Pastor: A Memoir* (New York: Harper Collins, 2011).

sincerely want to help people, and these narratives lead them to consider how the pastor's role is distinctive.

Issues related to staying a long time in one place come up in *The Pastor* as well as in *Gilead*.²³ *Gilead* also contains one of the best stories about what it means to be prophetic in one's context when John Ames discusses the one sermon he burned without preaching. *Gilead* is full of other richness, as well. These and numerous other narratives raise the challenging and existential question: What is success in ministry? It is a good question to ponder before the popular cultural versions of success begin to impact us.

Heidi Neumark's *Breathing Space: A Spiritual Journey in the South Bronx*²⁴ is a rich account of a ministry that seeks faithfulness and neighbor love in a life and death urban setting. Neumark's depiction of twenty years as a pastor and her integration of theological, ecclesiastical, communal, and pragmatic concerns is among the best. *Adam by Adam*,²⁵ the autobiography of Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., explores another form of urban ministry that mixes pulpit and public service with politics. Ralph Ellison's *Juneteenth*²⁶ is an amazing novel that also looks at the mix of politics and preaching, but it is such a challenging read that it is tough for students to finish and process in a week.

The nature of pastoral and priestly power is present in *Upon This Rock: The Miracles of a Black Church*,²⁷ as well as *The Power and the Glory*.²⁸ Pastoral abuse of power is

²³ Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 2004).

²⁴ Heidi Neumark, *Breathing Space: A Spiritual Journey in the South Bronx* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2004).

²⁵ Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., *Adam by Adam: The Autobiography of Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.* (New York: Kensington Publishing Corp., 1994).

²⁶ Ralph Ellison, *Juneteenth* (New York: Vintage Books, 2000).

²⁷ Samuel Freedman, *Upon This Rock: The Miracles of a Black Church* (New York: Harper, 1994).

²⁸ Graham Greene, *The Power and the Glory* (New York: Penguin Books, 1978).

present in *Elmer Gantry*²⁹ or Updike's *A Month of Sundays*³⁰ and in Robert Duvall's film, *The Apostle*.³¹ The implications of the Donatist controversy—What is the importance of the character of the pastor to the ministry?—fill “The Apostle,” as well as Louise Erdrich's *Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*,³² in which the protagonist is, first, a religious sister, then a wife, and, finally, a long-time Catholic priest on a reservation.

Bernanos' *Diary of a Country Priest*³³ and Endo's *Silence*³⁴ (both film and book versions) explore the demands for suffering when students feel the right to self-care. *Pastrix*³⁵ is personally disclosive and tells of a winding road to a call, women in ministry, and inventive forms of church. The mixed heritage of Christianity and colonialism emerges in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*,³⁶ *Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*, and *Silence*.

It should be clear that this is not a class in religion in literature, but rather a set of texts with a sharp focus on the lives of pastors for the sake of stirring the growing pastoral imagination. It raises perennial and thorny theological questions: Who is a minister? What is a call, and how is it known and lived? How do ministers receive authority for their work? How do pastors balance the divine and the all-too-human—their mistakes, failures, and clumsy actions? How do our personal and theological ideals meet local realities? How do pastors manage personal and family demands with the demands of their work? Is a pastor called to minister to the whole world or to a specific congregation? How do the pastoral and the

²⁹ Sinclair Lewis, *Elmer Gantry* (New York: New American Library, 1970).

³⁰ John Updike, *A Month of Sundays* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1975).

³¹ Robert Duvall, *The Apostle*, DVD (Los Angeles: Universal, 1998).

³² Louise Erdrich, *Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2001).

³³ Georges Bernanos, *Diary of a Country Priest* (Garden City, N.Y.: Image Books, 1974).

³⁴ Shusaku Endo, *Silence* (New York: Taplinger Publishing Company, 1980).

³⁵ Nadia Bolz-Weber, *Pastrix: The Cranky, Beautiful Faith of a Sinner & Saint* (New York: Jericho Books, 2013).

³⁶ Willa Cather, *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (London: Virago Press, 2006).

prophetic interact? What are our aims in ministry, and how do we know if we are meeting them? How do humility and accomplishment mix in pastoral work? What is success? How do we live in but not of this world? How do we sustain ourselves in this undervalued and undercompensated work?

The shared readings raise powerful questions for pastors at all stages in their vocational journey. But my aim with this class is to surface how the pastoral life embodies theological challenges and to plant seeds that foster growth of a pastoral disposition, beyond the confines of the classroom.³⁷

Additional Observations on Fostering Growth

What else can we do in the seminary to foster and nourish students for the third apprenticeship? First, we can recognize and critique the dichotomies we use. Our habits of making distinctions between theology/practice or theory/application are useful in some ways, but they also distort. When we are considering the telos of formation for ministry as well as for ministry itself, the moments we distinguish in school flow together. In our orientations to the school for students, do we focus on the school or on its place within a longer trajectory and the need to remember those larger horizons? Can we try to talk more in terms of continuities and seasons, not separation? Can we give a new and different account of the fullness of the formation process?

Second, a shared understanding of the limits of the classroom might help move schools and teachers toward the virtue of humility about our work and what it can accomplish. Humility is a hard virtue to cultivate in our current performance culture and in an institution in which mastery is prized and hierarchies and power differentials are heightened. However, if we can openly, honestly, and

³⁷ The goal is to make these readings diverse, which for this purpose include race, gender, gender orientation, culture, tradition/denomination, era, demographics, rural-urban setting, and geography. Each selection on its own is not fully adequate.

vulnerably acknowledge what we can and cannot do, to our students and to the churches they serve, it will free us to do more adequate preparation. Practicing humility will allow us to tell students to expect much valuable learning to continue after they have their degree in hand and why that is appropriately so.

Third, an understanding of formation as a longer trajectory that continues after completing school will help us think in different ways about our pedagogy. In our efforts to be helpful, exercises that invite students to apply what they have learned in a theory-laden class to a ministry setting often feel forced and contribute to a sense of practice that is demeaned.

I think it is possible in school to anticipate the future challenges of the second and third apprenticeships. Teachers can explore new ways to foster “anticipatory learning” that extend beyond school, especially in what has been called “practice-centered pastoral formation.”³⁸ How can we bring students more into contact with masters of the craft, who are using the knowledge and skills they have acquired in a fully formed way characteristic of excellent ministry? Narratives are one answer, of course, but so are personal interactions such as “master classes.”

Fourth, we can direct our students toward help through two supportive developmental processes. David Wood, former director of the Transition into Ministry programs funded by Lilly Endowment, notes that novices need mentors: “experience in and of itself, garnered by individuals who are isolated from mature and maturing practitioners, is not the wisest teacher.”³⁹ To thrive,

³⁸ James P. Wind and David J. Wood, *Becoming a Pastor: Reflections on the Transition into Ministry* (Herndon, Va.: Alban Institute Special Report, 2008), 33,

<https://alban.org/uploadedFiles/Alban/Bookstore/pdf/TiMReport.pdf>, accessed March 24, 2018.

³⁹ David Wood, “Transition into Ministry: Reconceiving the Boundaries Between Seminaries and Congregations,” *For Life Abundant: Practical Theology*,

numerous studies suggest, ministers need guides and fellow travelers who can help steer their ongoing journey toward faithfulness, excellence, and wisdom. The function of mentors who can model, exemplify, and guide is critical, especially in the early years of becoming a pastor. The role of a community of professional peers to which one belongs is also essential.⁴⁰ As Matt Bloom of the Flourishing in Ministry Project notes, “One of the most alarming results that is emerging from our study... (is that) Unfortunately, membership (in a colleague/peer group) appears to be in rather short supply for many pastors.”⁴¹

As part of teaching what we can and cannot do in the long trajectory of formation, we in the schools can tell our students repeatedly how important it will be for their flourishing to find mentors and peer groups for ongoing growth and development and as a way to further their formation of professional identity. We also can ask the churches to pay more attention to the importance of mentors and colleagues, in communities of practice, so that new ministers can continue the learning they must do throughout their ministries.⁴² This is a different sort of continuing education than we usually do, but it is equal in importance to the “lecture by an expert” approach that has characterized much continuing education for pastors. Both deserve our support and advocacy.

Finally

In relation to long-time perceptions of a gap in preparation for ministry and the needs of practice, I have

Theological Education, and Christian Ministry (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2008), 302.

⁴⁰ See Wind and Wood, *Becoming a Pastor*, 29–32 and 34–38. See also Bloom, especially 30–34 on mentors and 34–41 on “membership” in “the community of pastors.”

⁴¹ Bloom, 40.

⁴² See the work of Etienne Wenger, briefly presented at <http://wenger-trayner.com/introduction-to-communities-of-practice>; also <https://www.learning-theories.com/communities-of-practice-lave-and-wenger.html> for another brief description, accessed March 24, 2018.

described limits to the classroom approach that go beyond the constraints of time and complexity. If we struggle to escape the classroom walls, I have suggested that we pay attention to the longer and broader trajectory of formation, especially in relation to forming pastoral identity. We in the school have an opportunity to make our excellent contributions even more adequate by seeding the imagination with pastoral narratives, by preparing and pointing to the need for mentoring, and by giving students practice with colleague communities, which are so essential for thriving in ministry.

Ministry is an amazingly complex vocation. Those who become and thrive as wise pastors will use their learning base, enjoy guidance while gaining proficiency in the many practices of ministry, continue to learn in the company of good colleagues, and develop an intuitive outlook and understanding that is a thing of beauty. Living with pastoral narratives helps to get that process started.