

Theological Education for Life Abundant

Notes for panel presentation on the biblical vision of “abundant life” as *telos* for practical theology, Christian theological education and Christian ministry

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2/26-28/2009  
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1. Thanks, first of all, to Dorothy Bass for framing this discussion, to Craig Dykstra for his expanded discussion of pastoral and ecclesial imagination and to those who contributed provocative essays to this volume.
2. In the time that I have I intend to pose three questions to highlight three issues for further conversation. I state them independently, but in my mind, they are highly inter-related. Each is concerned with the pedagogical cultures in theological education that influence the formation of student pastoral imaginations.
3. Question # 1: How might our social location as theological educators and clergy influence what and how we think about a practical theology of abundant life in the education of Christian ministers?
  - a. The book argues for a metaphor that can function as a unifying *telos* for practical theology in theological education. In the Carnegie Foundation study of clergy education we discovered in some seminaries that unifying metaphors can significantly influence the practical theological shape of their pedagogical cultures. Three examples—a vision of prophetic ministry grounds the curriculum and teaching practice of the Howard faculty; the shared heritage of the *middle passage* for African Americans focuses and orders the practices of teaching and learning at Virginia Union; and a vision of effective liturgical leadership permeates the culture of teaching and learning at Church Divinity School of the Pacific.
  - b. This leads me to consider challenges in the biblical vision of abundant life to the ways we think about practical theology and theological education in forming ministers. In his essay Craig Dykstra refers to Heidi Neumark’s ministry in the Bronx. Where did she learn to envision possibilities for abundant life in the deprivation of that context? Another example: When we lived in Atlanta we attended a so-called transitional congregation of “hold out whites” and African war refugees. I often wondered where the pastor of that lively congregation learned to see possibilities of abundant life in the scarcity

of that congregation's resources. And currently I wonder how the pastor of the downtown city church we now attend might learn to envision possibilities for abundant life in the encounter of the abundance, scarcity, and deprivation that constitutes the experience of that congregation's diverse constituencies?

- c. I would argue that this book was written predominantly from the vantage point of the experience of abundance; that most of us do our practical theological writing and teaching from the standpoint of our own experience of abundance. Full engagement with the biblical metaphor however, leads me to wonder if our practices of teaching and learning for "abundant life" might not require us to take seriously the full range of deprivation, scarcity, and abundance in the human condition. If that were the case, what would be the impact on what and how we teach and learn in theological education?
4. Question #2: How do we envision the conversation among the stakeholders in the future of practical theology and theological education in forming ministers?
- a. The book and this conference model one response to this question. Disciplinary practical theologians, theological educators from across the practice disciplines of the theological curriculum who identify themselves as practical theologians; Bible scholars, theologians, historians, ethicists and others in the theological community concerned with issues of practice, clergy, and denominational leaders concerned with the preparation of ministers have been convened into this conversation.
  - b. I would suggest that missing from this conversation are those in both theological school and church communities who view practical theology not so much as a discipline, but as a distinctively integrative way of thinking from practice, a habit of learning embedded in practice in all aspects of the theological curriculum.
  - c. Envisioning theological education through the lens of the biblical vision of abundant life highlights an intriguing insight into the relationship of the stakeholders in theological education from the Carnegie Foundation study of clergy education—namely, that those schools in which students experienced the most coherent pedagogical culture in the journey from novices toward expertise in the practices of ministry were also the schools in which all members of the faculty and often their clinical or field education colleagues as well, were engaged in a sustained practical theology conversation. Some examples:
    - i. At Church Divinity School of the Pacific that conversation occurred most frequently in the preparation and practice for the performance of liturgy 15 times a week, but it also spilled over into classrooms and faculty deliberations over the life and mission of the school.
    - ii. At Trinity Lutheran the discussion that began years ago in the merger talks of its two predecessor seminaries with very different

assumptions about the relationship of theory and practice in the preparation of ministers. That discussion continues to this day in deliberations about curriculum, academic standards, teaching and learning.

- d. These thoughts lead me to conclude that the proposal to envision theological education through the lens of the biblical vision of “abundant life” has the potential for an equally compelling practical theological conversation among the stakeholders in the education of ministers. It would be my hunch, however, that most seminary faculties and church agencies that take this proposal seriously will find themselves engaged in what Ron Heifetz and Marty Linsky (2002, *Leadership on the Line*, Cambridge: Harvard Business School Press) have called an adaptive challenge.
  - e. The challenge originates in the metaphor itself. “Abundant life” is not an individualistic or personal vision either in the Bible or for Bonhoeffer, whose writing has influenced this project. A personal example may illustrate my point. I developed some appreciation for Bonhoeffer’s ecclesial vision as a seminary student. His presence permeated the halls of Union Theological Seminary in the early 1960’s where I first read *Life Together*, *Letters from Prison*, and *Cost of Discipleship*. But the possibilities and challenges of his vision for Christian community became real in my first pastoral appointment in a congregation where nearly half of the adult members participated in small covenant groups that had developed their patterns of common life through the reading of Bonhoeffer’s *Life Together*. Participation in that congregation’s practices of community transformed my assumptions about the possibilities for relationality in ecclesial life and the mutuality of clergy and laity in ministry.
  - f. Bonhoeffer’s understanding of life *together* significantly influenced the discussion of abundant life among the authors of this book. That leads me to wonder about the potential impact our practical theological conversations might have on the cultures of our teaching and learning if they were grounded in the *lived* experience of “abundant life *together*” “in our seminary faculties, our denominational boards and agencies, the congregations we attend and in the interactions that we have with each other.
5. Question III: To what extent are the various parts of the learning system or the configuration of agencies aligned in cultivating student expertise as practical theologians engaged in the practices of ministry?
- a. My question is prompted by my perception that in the contemporary American Christian religious context, most of us do not approach our work as theologians or church leaders in a coherent ecology or configuration of agencies that support and sustain the interdependence of our efforts or facilitate the mutuality of our influence. Our conversations and our teaching are predominantly episodic, effectively

disconnected from forces that anticipate or build on other efforts in the curriculum or in the patterns of theological school and church interactions.

- b. I want to probe this question with an expanded commentary on Jim Nieman's essay on the class he and Tom Schattauer taught at Wartburg Seminary. In his essay Jim did not describe how the context shaped and supported his teaching effort or sustained his goals in forming student understandings and cultivating student excellence in the conduct of ritual practices. That was not the purpose of his essay, but my question leads me to identify several agents to student learning in the Wartburg context that deepened and intensified his pedagogical efforts.
- c. I had the privilege of spending some extended time with the Wartburg Seminary faculty during the years Jim and Tom were teaching this course. During my visits I discovered clues to what might be called an ecology of practical theology learning directed to the cultivation of expertise in ministry practice. Among other things it included a number of disparate but highly inter-related educational efforts.
  - i. Unlike many US seminaries most students at Wartburg shared the same denominational heritage. Enough had grown up in Lutheran congregations and there had been enough denominational coherence in their religious formation as children and youth to form a critical mass of perspective and practice faculty members could assume in their preparations to teach.
  - ii. The faculty and administration were for the most part, deeply invested in denominational conversations about its life and mission.
  - iii. Denominational leaders—especially bishops were frequent visitors and participants in the academic and liturgical life of the seminary.
  - iv. The whole faculty was engaged in a sustained and disciplined practical theological conversation about their own teaching practice that students “overheard” in a variety of ways and places.
  - v. The course was designed to build on a series of earlier courses from across the curriculum and beginning field education experiences. Due to faculty conversations on teaching Jim had a good idea of what he could expect of students who had taken these courses.
  - vi. Like other Lutheran seminaries the faculty was preparing the students at Wartburg for a year of internship under pastoral and congregational supervision before their final year of academic study.
  - vii. Community worship provided a shared rhythmic structure for the ritual practices of the community embedded in the liturgical traditions of the seminary's denominational heritage and renewed through the shared exercise of faculty and student leadership.

- viii. Jim and Tom were deeply invested in conversations about liturgy and preaching in the denomination and in their respective guilds.
- d. We discovered a similar habitus of sustained formation in the excellence (to use the Lilly Endowment term) of ministry practice in a few of the schools involved in the Carnegie Foundation study. We asked students in these schools how they had learned to integrate the academic and practice dimensions of their study. One student seemed to sum up the experience of many—“I don’t really know,” he said, “it seems as if integration chased us through our entire time in seminary.” Jim and Tom’s students, I would argue were immersed in the collaborative exercise of church and seminary aligned in purpose and practice in forming student pastoral imaginations and expertise—a task emphasizing the interplay of attention to pastoral identity, pastoral knowledge, and pastoral competencies.
- e. In other schools in the Carnegie Foundation study—especially those that had embraced religious and cultural diversity—that collaborative ethos was much more episodic. The responsibility for the integration of knowledge and skill was often handed over to the student. Students reported more anxiety about what they would be encountering after graduation. Even though they had often performed well in their classes, they conveyed less confidence about the confluence of their preparation for engaging the challenges of congregational ministry.

There is much more I could say, but my time is up. I will not leave however, until I say once again how appreciative I am for the catalytic force of this book in challenging us to think in fresh ways about practical theology, theological education and Christian ministry.