



Vocational Formation for Ministry: The Need for Contextual Reflection

CHRISTIAN SCHAREN

The work of vocational formation for ministry divides into two parts. One part consists of learning basic knowledge about God’s mission and the church, centered on word and sacrament. The other part is learning how to use this material for leadership in particular contexts. The two parts need to be held in dynamic tension. As students learn basic knowledge in a seminary classroom setting, such learning needs to stay integrally connected to its horizon of use—its “so what.”

Effective formation in context begins when one really takes on the role of minister, stepping in as a leader and engaging a congregation and community. With this the new ministry leader needs regular reflection on practice with peers and with an experienced ministry leader. In the case of more intensive experiences like internship (usually twelve months of pastoral leadership in a ministry context), a third key reflection loop is added: a group of laity chosen to give direct support and feedback to the new leader.

There is an important learning difference between a seminary student and an intern pastor. One learns differently, and more deeply, when one tries on the professional role. When someone comes to the student as a pastor, the pretense of standing at some distance from the role evaporates. The question immediately becomes, “How am I to be her or his pastor in this moment?” The risk and responsibility of such experiences (and almost every one of them a “first time”) are the stuff of pastoral formation in practice. Because of the risk involved in stepping out on paths as yet untried, the holding environment of good supervisor, peer, and lay support is crucial.

The best learning takes place in congregations that open themselves to become vital places of teaching and learning in ministry. Congregations help the seminary students, to be sure; yet it changes the congregation, too, in positive ways. Churches become aware of their wisdom—things basic to good ministry—when they articulate them for the sake of teaching newly developing pastors about the life and work of ministry.

Of course, pastors need to know the basics of faith and ministry offered in classrooms. Yet, knowledge of God’s mission or the church’s participation in

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Vocational Formation for Ministry: The Need for the Classical Disciplines

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Arriving on campus at a large Midwestern university in the late 1970s, Sherryl Kleinman, a graduate student in sociology, a Jew by birth, and a self-described religious agnostic, was, like most graduate students, interested in finding cheap digs. Told that a local seminary provided dorm rooms to outside students at reasonable prices, she obtained one, although she was a bit nervous at the prospect of spending time around students dedicated to a religion that she did not share and engaged in the quest for meaning that held no significance for her. She was especially anxious about the prospect of being proselytized. To her surprise, however, she found the seminary students remarkably “unreligious” in their character and concerns. No one questioned her beliefs—or lack of them. For Kleinman, her entire experience living in a seminary dorm was so unusual, particularly from her viewpoint as an unreligious outsider, that she soon resolved to make “Midwest Seminary” (as she calls it) the object of a sociological study. The result was an instant classic: *Equals Before God: Seminarians as Humanistic Professionals*.

Kleinman received permission from the school to attend classes and interview professors and administrators. Armed with a tape recorder, she conversed with students in dorm rooms, at the cafeteria, and out on the town. What she found was that the vast majority of seminarians at this mainline Protestant institution were prone to translate biblical ideas and traditional dogmatic language into what she calls “feeling states.” For them, the basis for religious reality had become the subjective and interpersonal sphere of human discourse and relationships. The budding pastors saw themselves primarily as counselors, not preachers, and facilitators of healthy self-awareness, not deliverers of tradition. For example, after spending several weeks observing, Kleinman was told by a student that she would make a good minister. “Why?” asked Kleinman, perplexed at the suggestion. “Because you are such a good listener,” was the reply.¹ Here the ministry of the gospel was equated with a common characteristic shared by all sorts of people.

In Kleinman’s view, this psychologizing and leveling of the pastor’s office—which she calls the “new ideology” of ministry—raises serious questions about the professional status of the occupation. Sociologically speaking, ministry is a

¹Sherryl Kleinman, *Equals Before God: Seminarians as Humanistic Professionals* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984) 53.

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God's mission does not yet make a pastor; another kind of learning is needed, where this knowledge is put to use in congregational life.

One fine pastoral mentor in Minneapolis offers keen insight. "I have tremendous respect for what seminaries do," he says, "but for all their good efforts, they aren't able to replicate the range of situations that prepare students for the 'daily-ness' of parish ministry." Or, in the words of one intern, "This isn't a classroom; it's the real thing."^{*}

Vocation formation begins before seminary and continues long after seminary. Seminary offers the focused moment of deepened knowledge and reflective practice crucial for the formation of evangelical public leaders. So what lies between the halting efforts of a newbie practitioner and the more intuitive leadership of a mature practitioner? Many things help, but one is essential: reflective practice. It does little good to try something out with no feedback on how it went.

Three levels of reflection practice are important: "Observe and reflect" lets the student be an authorized observer, going with the supervisor to the hospital room, family home, or community meeting. Being present together then provides the basis of a conversation about the "whats" and "whys" involved in the situation. Quickly, a second level emerges. The intern will "participate and reflect." The supervisor can agree in advance on what role the intern can play in the hospital visit or the premarital session. Then, again, conscious reflection on the dynamics of the situation and the roles played by each opens up the experience to deeper levels of integration. "Lead and reflect" is the goal of reflective learning. While this may seem obvious, there are pitfalls to avoid. While some independence is helpful, the supervisor needs to be in proximity on a regular basis, observing the intern leading so that adequate reflection can ensue.

In the end, growth happens through learning, planning, acting, and reflecting. The goal is for this to happen with increasing risk and responsibility for leadership. Additionally, it is important to have the support of attentive and thoughtful supervisors, peers, and lay members whose aim is not to judge but to discern current strengths and next steps for growth. Finally, it is good to remember: we do our part, but God who began a good work in us will bring it to completion in Christ Jesus (Phil 1:6). Between classroom and congregation, we participate together with the Spirit's work in raising up a new generation of leaders for God's mission of mercy and love for all creation. ☩

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^{*}See George Mason, *Preparing the Pastors: Reclaiming the Congregation's Role in Training Clergy* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2012).

profession. To have a profession is to act in a certain way and impart a body of knowledge: professionals *profess*. “Deprofessionalization” results when there is “a loss to professional occupations of their unique qualities, particularly their monopoly over knowledge, public belief in their service ethos, and expectations of work autonomy and authority over the client.”² Deprofessionalization is what is happening to mainline Protestant ministry.

What then should seminarians do? What constitutes their vocational formation? Perhaps the first thing is to realize that seminary education has two structural elements that are of crucial importance in combating the deprofessionalization of the ministry. Both involve classical disciplines: biblical studies and church history. The first is language requirements. All students studying for the ministry should learn Greek and at least a smattering of Hebrew. This basic requirement forces students to confront the biblical text as an objective reality that takes enormous intellectual effort simply to read. It provides the seminarian with an understanding of the Scriptures that goes far beyond the average layperson. The seminarian may do nothing with this knowledge. He or she may let feelings or ideology be the light that guides the path from Genesis to Revelation. There are no guarantees. But for the majority of students, the study of Scriptures in the original languages is an activity that forces them outside of themselves and into another world.

The Roman Catholic theologian John Courtney Murray once put before the reader the ultimate question that divides orthodox from liberal. “The word of God—what is it?” he asks. “Is it to be identified with its effect in experience in such wise that what I experience is what God said? In other words, on hearing the word of God, am I, in effect, simply talking to myself or is the word of God really a word, the utterance of Another, a thing of meaning, which contains conceptions and affirmations that were embodied in it by the Speaker and not by me?”³ After Greek and Hebrew classes, the student may be ready to hear the wisdom of this question and the challenge that it presents. Scripture indeed has a Speaker—and it is not oneself. This is formation for vocation.

Second, students should study the creeds and confessions. This forces them back to the early church and the Reformation, to the deepest epochs in the church’s long story. It lays before them the content and grammar of the faith. Once again there is no guarantee that the student will use this knowledge effectively. But he or she cannot help but learn the bone and sinew of the Christian tradition. This is formation for vocation. ⊕

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²Ibid., 2.

³John Courtney Murray, *The Problem of God* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1964) 56.