

SECTION 3

THE FUTURE OF MINISTRIES AND THE FUTURE OF SEMINARIES



Editor's Introduction

I graduated from seminary in 1962. It was a heady time to begin ministry. Congregations grew up overnight, and clergy were on the front lines advocating social change. When I began teaching pastoral care at Princeton Theological Seminary in 1969, there were ninety-four students in my first class. It was a heady time to begin teaching pastoral care. Today, there are always less than ninety-four people in the church where I worship on Sunday. When I concluded teaching regularly in 2013, the culture and the church and the discipline of pastoral care had all changed. By then, churches were smaller, ministry was discouraging in many parts of the United States, seminaries were struggling to stay afloat, and spiritual care was no longer at the center of ministry preparation.

DO SEMINARIES HAVE A FUTURE?

The future of seminaries in the United States has been a persistent, troubling question for decades. The social and political turmoil of the '60s and '70s was the occasion for radical innovations in the methods and content of teaching theology, not all of which endured. With the publication of *Theologia* in 1983, Edward Farley sounded an alarm that sparked a serious conversation regarding the fragmentation of theological education.¹ The ossification of systematic theology, practical theology, Scripture, and Church history into "discipline silos" meant that integration was often absent from ministry studies. Moreover, Farley observed, seminaries were stuck in a "clerical paradigm" that too frequently limited theological study to preparing professional clergy. Following Farley, I proposed in a 1984 essay that the

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central task of seminary education was the formation of a pastoral *habitus*. I suggested repurposing seminary education as a process of integration within the person of the minister.²

Shortly after the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America was formed in 1985, it launched a study of theological education that led to significant structural changes in response to the following issues already evident in the late '80s: radical demographic changes, global interdependence, economic factors affecting ongoing financial stability, communications technology, and burgeoning cultural and religious diversity.³ In the last two decades, these challenges have expanded and intensified into a 'perfect storm' that threatens the future of theological seminaries: reduced seminary enrollment mirrors the steady decline in mainline protestant church attendance and religious affiliation in America; the persistent erosion of financial support and escalating student debt combine to challenge the sustainability of seminaries; and there is a need for and demand for distance learning.

Two books published in 2019 explore further the current threat to seminaries. In her introduction to one of these books, *Disruption and Hope*, Barbara Wheeler describes the crisis this way: "The disruptive changes in the religious, social and economic environment are forcing nearly every theological school to rethink both its form and its function."⁴ Benjamin Valentin, the editor of the other recent study, *Looking Forward with Hope*, proposes that the future of theological education depends on expanding its purpose beyond preparing professional ministers for a "grander calling"⁵ that includes a wide variety of vocations.

Seminaries need to seek, make room for a greater (dare we say higher?) calling—a calling that includes not only the pursuit of and preparation for ministry but also the fostering of other 'professions' and pursuits aimed at the search for transcendence and the building of a more sacred, compassionate, just, and peaceful world.⁶

This is a pivotal time for theological education in the United States. It cannot continue to do business as usual. Seminaries face fiscal instability as well as questions about purpose and scope. The future of seminaries is not self-evident, however, because the changes in church and culture are both extensive and rapid. Daniel Aleshire captures the current dilemma with a vivid biblical image drawn from the Abraham story: "Something is happening, and it is not clear whether theological schools are going somewhere they have never been that holds great promise or if they are leaving a land

of kindred and houses for a future of diminished possibilities.”⁷ This symposium explores the connection between emerging models of ministry and the theological education agenda of preparing ministers today for an uncertain tomorrow.

These reflections presume the North American context and do not take into account theological education in the Global South and elsewhere in the world. It is generally agreed that there are not enough seminaries in parts of Africa, Latin America, and Asia, where Christianity is growing rapidly. The new believers in these emerging churches who seek ministry preparation are from marginalized and oppressive contexts with minimal formal education easily available. Their initial education needs to be oral, vernacular, and focused on developing the skill of translating Christian thought into a very different worldview. The great fear, according to Ashish Chrispal, a leader in the Lausanne Global Movement, is that local governments and North American churches will insist on academic standards that will make the needed education less accessible.⁸

When the theme for this volume of *Reflective Practice* was envisioned, no one could have anticipated how the current global pandemic would further exacerbate changes in religious practice and intensify the underlying questions about the future of theological education. The questions examined in these essays are made even more relevant by the social changes temporarily mandated by Covid-19. How shall we prepare women and men for ministries of the future we cannot yet imagine? What new virtues and aptitudes will be needed for ministry when diversity and social instability and global anxiety are the new normal and accelerated change is constant? When Christine Zaker envisioned in her essay that being in proximity with the marginalized should be both the locus and goal of theological education, she could not have anticipated that proximity would suddenly be forbidden by a viral pandemic.

MINISTRY PRACTICE AND THEOLOGICAL SEMINARIES

This volume of *Reflective Practice* on new models of ministry adds a unique perspective to the discussion about the future of theological education. In the lead essay in this symposium, Daniel Aleshire, who was the executive director of the Association of Theological Schools for nineteen years, has carefully recounted the development of theological seminaries in the

United States around three interrelated factors: higher education, religion, and culture. The agenda for seminaries has also been driven by the needs of religious traditions for theologically competent and skilled pastoral leaders.⁹ Other social and economic forces have shaped and reshaped images of the minister and of the seminary agenda. In the current perfect storm, the dependable images of both the learned clergy and the professional minister are under siege.

Over the last few decades, a major factor defining our understanding of ministry in the United States has been the cultural dominance of consumer capitalism and expressive individualism. Beginning in the '70s, two of the frequently used metaphors of the minister have been "manager" and "therapist." Drawing on Robert Bellah's insights into the dominance of corporate culture in the United States, Dennis P. McCann wrote in 1988 that the manager's task is to organize the human and nonhuman resources available to a congregation to improve its location in the 'marketplace.'

Effective ministry pays for itself. The only proven way to assure that the congregation stays afloat as a 'going concern' is to rationalize its administration according to conventional standards of marketing, accounting, and other subdisciplines of business management.¹⁰

Clergy were viewed as professionals and, like all professionals, were budding entrepreneurs whose survival depended on being successful with their clientele. More recently, programs in theological education that promote "excellence in ministry" contain residues of the *success ethic* of a society dominated by capitalism that has replaced the earlier *work ethic*. Values like "excellence," "success," and "expertise" continue to arise out of a particular economic arrangement in which professional ministerial identity is framed by consumer ideals.

Although other images of the minister, such as "pastoral leader" or "wounded healer" or "servant leader," have gained prominence, I believe that images of the minister as "manager" and "therapist" continue to shape our understanding of the practice of ministry. The current embodiment of the minister as therapist is evident in the growth of chaplaincy not only in hospitals but in large corporations. In his editorial introduction to section 1 in this volume, Scott Sullender suggests that chaplaincy will be the predominant model of ministry in the twenty-first century. The data gathered by the Chaplaincy Innovation Lab supports the idea that chaplaincy may become **the** metaphor for ministry in American society in the twenty-first

century.¹¹ This trajectory is testimony to the success of the clinical pastoral movement in training more than one generation of clergy who identify with the role of chaplain whatever their context. In this time, as institutional religious affiliation declines, the image of chaplaincy is an accessible metaphor for ministry with people who are less religiously affiliated but still are concerned about spiritual matters in daily living.

THE MINISTER AS ENTREPRENEUR

Although the evangelical movement has emphasized entrepreneurial ministry for several decades, I was surprised that Rabbi David Teutsch acknowledges in his essay in this section that rabbis in the future will function more and more as entrepreneurs in the Jewish culture. In the evangelical tradition, ministerial entrepreneurs are understood in two distinct ways; those who see their ministerial role as bivocational (combining two spheres of work) and those who see their work as an entrepreneur in business as a calling or vocation. The word 'entrepreneurial' is also used to describe taking the initiative (ordinarily outside established structures) to make something happen. Theological seminaries in the evangelical tradition have for some time encouraged students to integrate and weave ministry and community-building into the business model called 'ministerial entrepreneurship.'

The emergence of 'entrepreneurial rabbis' is prompted by the turbulence affecting the Jewish community. According to Teutsch, as political, economic, social, and techno-scientific change continues to accelerate, rabbis will need to be much more entrepreneurial in their approaches to existing institutions and programs. In this context, being entrepreneurial is about personal creativity and organizational innovation in initiating new organizations and paradigms. Some rabbis will shape careers outside institutions or to build new kinds of congregations and organizations. In an article about Jewish women, most often pediatricians, who are moving into ritual circumcision, Rabbi Dov Linzer said this about rabbinic entrepreneurialism:

It's sort of like, I am a mohel. I am open for business. I am going to advertise on Facebook. I am going to get clients. It isn't how we tend to think about opportunities for rabbis. There are babies born every day, and if you are doing well, you can make a nice living.¹²

As participation in synagogue life declines, there will still be a reason for Jewish community centers to preserve the culture. People who choose not to live as a Jew still want to be buried as a Jew. Not unlike students who attend Protestant seminaries, Jewish students in seminary often have little education in the faith and uneven previous experiences of Judaism. Seminaries must provide an immersion into Jewish community life and practice and teach skills for ministry as well as a classic education. To all of that, courses in entrepreneurship have been added.

MINISTRY AND EVANGELISM

Preparing ministers for the work of evangelism is a focus of two of the essays in this section. Although the methods are different, Roman Catholic and evangelical seminaries share evangelization and mission as a common purpose for theological education. Christina Zaker's essay reflects the vision of Pope Francis that priests, deacons, and lay ministers are all called to be "missionary disciples," both now and in the future. In Roman Catholic seminaries, this emphasis on witnessing to the Gospel of Jesus Christ is coupled with equal attention to the pursuit of justice and solidarity with the poor. Zaker translates that double perspective into a proposal about Catholic theological education itself. "Future Catholic theological education needs to include an integrated emphasis on practicing proximity at the peripheries."

The focus on *practicing proximity* at the margins is a particular embodiment of the mandate from Pope Francis to "go forth from our own comfort zone in order to reach all the 'peripheries' in need of the light of the Gospel." I believe *practicing proximity* is a promising image for ministry in all religious traditions (even when the intent is not to evangelize) as more and more people *are* marginalized for reasons of ethnicity, race, gender, sexual orientation, or religion. As seminaries of the future find themselves on the financial margins, they will be a natural and authentic environment in which to practice with the poor. The summary of an address by Katarina Schuth, OSF, also in this section, identifies closer collaboration between priests and laity as a critical challenge for the future of ministry as well as Catholic theological education.

The essay by Dean G. Blevins, Robert Gailey, and Susan Brownlee offers a different locus and method for preparing evangelists as the *telos* of theological education. The locus of ministry is not at the margins but in the

marketplace. Building a flourishing marketplace, they propose, is all part of God's redeeming love story for humanity. The method of ministry includes not only bivocational individuals who trained both for business and ministry but also people who envision their business as a calling and are willing to risk success for the sake of human redemption and flourishing. Along the way, the authors of this essay believe, this partnership between ministry and business will also revitalize the church.

The essays by Zaker and Blevins et al., written from very different perspectives, regard the intersection of church and world, of faith and work, as essential. Connecting faith and life, whether in the marketplace or among the poor at the margins of society, depends on ministers who listen carefully to the world and respond creatively and faithfully as those sent into the world with the good news. Both essays understand ministry as mission and that one task of seminaries is to prepare people for the work of mission, which is referred in the Global South as "discipling disciples." Outside of clinical pastoral education and contextual education, the primary environments for ministerial training have been either the cloister (and its successor, the free-standing seminary) or the university. At a minimum, theological education will require greater attention to supervised learning in experiential contexts. Would theological education also benefit from being located closer to the mission centers of future ministries at the margins or in the marketplace?

ENTREPRENEURIAL CHAPLAINCY

Although the image of the minister as manager may seem obsolete in small, struggling religious communities, the continuing influence of the commercial culture of the United States is evident in the more frequent use of "entrepreneurial" to describe both a way of doing ministry and the locus where ministry occurs. Simultaneously, with the decline of institutional religion in the American social context in which people still regard some form of spirituality to be a valued worldview, it is not surprising that chaplaincy may well become the dominant metaphor for the future of ministry. Historically, chaplains have responded to people in existentially fraught circumstances by offering comfort and support. Earlier in this volume, there are stories of people engaged in new forms of ministry not limited to or

endorsed by religious institutions. In each instance, their ministries began with a vision and a risk and are sustained by determination and hope.

In many instances, the ministry followed an increasingly common pattern of chaplaincy in a work environment. Currently, there are chaplains who provide faith-based support or spiritual care for employees of large corporations like Tyson Foods, Target, Apple, and Goldman Sachs.¹³ They may not be managers in the usual sense, but they represent the concerns of the management for their employees' well-being. Other chaplains may establish an independent business that provides people with spiritual support or a life-cycle ritual moment. The work is freelance in the sense that the "entrepreneurial chaplain" is accountable to his or her clientele rather than a religious institution. New patterns of accountability will need to emerge to establish commonality among otherwise independent ministries. The report from Peadar Dalton earlier in this volume is a success story of the emerging image of this model of ministry. The minister as therapist and as manager has been reconfigured as an entrepreneurial chaplain.

Models of ministry that have stood the test of time will continue alongside more experiential expressions of service to the common good. The need of the early seminaries to create a literate clergy for the colonies was replaced by the necessity of forming leaders to mobilize and support communities of faith. In the future, there will be fewer people who identify as professional ministers and more individual ministries that serve people where they live and work and play. Theological education is likely to be increasingly personal, less professional, more diverse, simultaneously more global and more local, pragmatic, and practice-oriented. Some traditional seminaries will endure. However, as religious communities decline and new ad hoc ministries emerge and flourish, seminaries need to rethink their purpose and adapt their structures and educational patterns to new models of ministry.

CONCLUSION

One thing is now certain as we try to envision the future of ministries and seminaries. Patterns of living and gatherings of faith communities and practices of care will be permanently changed by Covid-19. In response to a new normal in the global, post-pandemic context, we will need more and varied ministries. Seminaries will need to be similarly diverse. Some, but not all, will remain traditional schools that teach a particular faith tradi-

tion and the practices required to sustain a congregational ministry. Other religious centers will emerge around specific ministries and particular contexts. People who feel called to ministries in the “age of coronavirus” will need to be courageous, willing to risk, committed to interdependence and mutuality, and capable of forming communities and leading them in the midst of social fluidity and religious diversity.

Most of all, the future of theological education in seminaries and other centers of ministry preparation will be formational in its educational goals and strategies. If the future focus will be on ministries more than ministers, the minister's person will be more important than their professional role. If chaplaincy becomes the dominant metaphor for ministry, clinical pastoral education will remain an important vehicle of ministry preparation, although its contexts for learning will of necessity become more diverse. Supervised ministry and contextual learning will also be increasingly important in ministerial formation. I concur with Daniel Aleshire's summary of this emphasis in his essay in this section:

A formational model of theological education fits a religious world full of stress and in need of care in a culture that has privatized religion. Its emphases on spiritual, moral, and relational maturity will be crucial to religious leaders, all of whom need a substantive spiritual and moral center.

If entrepreneurial chaplaincy becomes the dominant pattern, then further critical reflection on the lingering influence of the manager and therapist models of ministry will be necessary, particularly in a society dominated by privatized religion. Because there are likely to be fewer evaluating or certifying institutions in the future, formational theological education will need to help students discern their gifts for ministry in relation to their impulse to minister to the world's needs. It is not clear how seminaries and other ministerial preparation centers with increasingly limited resources will be able to provide appropriate formation for the emerging diversity of unique ministries. This volume of *Reflective Practice* connects explorations on the future of ministries with thinking about the future of theological education. I hope these essays will further those conversations toward a shared future.

Herbert Anderson
Editor Emeritus

NOTES

- 1 Edward Farley, *Theologia: The Fragmentation and Unity of Theological Education* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983). In the span of one decade, several books were published that explored the structure and purpose of theological education. For further exploration, see Barbara G. Wheeler and Edward Farley, eds., *Shifting Boundaries: Contextual Approaches to the Structure of Theological Education* (Louisville, KY: Westminster / John Knox Press, 1991).
- 2 Herbert Anderson, "The Recovery of *Habitus*," *Trinity Seminary Review*, 6 (1984).
- 3 Task Force for the Study of Religious Education, *Faithful Leaders for a Changing World: Theological Education for Mission in the ELCA*, Report to the 1995 Churchwide Assembly (1995).
- 4 Barbara G. Wheeler, Introduction, in *Disruption and Hope: Religious Traditions and the Future of Theological Education—Essays in Honor of Daniel O. Aleshire*, ed. Barbara G. Wheeler (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2019), 8.
- 5 Benjamin Valentin, Introduction, in Valentin, *Looking Forward with Hope: Reflections on the Present State and Future of Theological Education*, ed. Benjamin Valentin (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2019), xvi.
- 6 Valentin, "Embracing a Greater, Higher Calling: Redefining the Mission and Purpose of the Freestanding Protestant Seminary," in Valentin, *Looking Forward*, 46.
- 7 Daniel Aleshire, "First but Not Finished," in Valentin, *Looking Forward*, 2.
- 8 Ashish Chrispal, "Restoring Missional Vision in Theological Education: The Need for Transforming Pastoral Training in the Majority World," *Lausanne Global Analysis* 8, no. 5 (September 2019).
- 9 Although the need for radical change in seminary preparation has yet to be felt in the Roman Catholic Church, according to Donald Senior, "Fostering priestly identity that has been the focus of Catholic seminary education has to be balanced with mutual respect for lay ministers as coworkers and with respect and care for lay people the priest will serve." Donald Senior, "The Ecclesial Vision of Pope Francis and the Future of Catholic Theological Education," in Wheeler, *Disruption and Hope*, 78.
- 10 Dennis P. McCann, "Now We're in Business: The Impact of a Commercial Civilization on the Ethos of American Clergy," unpublished paper, December 29, 1988, p. 22. I have been unsuccessful in determining whether this paper was ever published. His ideas, written more than forty years ago, help to illumine the perfect storm faced by seminaries and ministry today.
- 11 Wendy Cadge and Michael Skaggs, "Chaplaincy? Spiritual Care? Innovation? A Case Statement," unpublished paper written for Chaplaincy Innovation Lab (2018), 15–18.
- 12 Alyson Krueger, "Jewish Women Are Moving into Ritual Circumcision," *New York Times*, March 1, 2020, p. 34.
- 13 David Crary, "More US Firms Are Providing Faith-Based Support for Employees," *Christian Century* 137, no. 6 (March 11, 2020): 16–17.