

EDUCATION FOR MINISTRY

searching for a wholistic approach

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Ministry is service. We serve God first by worship, whether in the church service or in our personal prayer disciplines. Second, we serve God by caring for others in God's world and for Creation, whether individually or as a group. Third, we serve God by helping each other in the Christian community, whether with each other's personal needs or to empower a stronger collective ministry.

Too often, education for ministry has been a piece-meal thing with graduate schools training professional clergy, regional church bodies and independent agencies occasionally offering training for church leaders, and the local congregation hopefully empowering the ministry of church members. We haven't cut ministerial education from whole cloth because we have seldom seen the ministry of the church in a wholistic way.

Let us:

- I. Look at historic models of ministry
- II. Speculate on a scriptural and contemporarily relevant way to organize ministry
- III. Define the basic elements of ministerial formation
- IV. Suggest educational strategies for ministry.

I. Historic models of ministry

A. The three orders: The early church developed three *orders* of ministry. For each a person was ordained. It was possible to proceed "up the ladder" from one order to another. The three orders were:

- deacon
- presbyter (elder, priest, minister)
- episcopé (bishop)

A presbyter would be ordained a deacon before being ordained a presbyter, and the bishop would be selected from the presbyters. This pattern is followed by the Roman Catholic Church, Episcopal Church, Methodist Church, and many others. This pattern was assumed by the *Plan of Union* of the Consultation on Church Union (1970), and the World Council of Churches document, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (1982). This last document has provided a basis for ecumenical cooperation.

If the United Church of Christ were to evolve into this pattern, the licensed minister could become the deacon, and the Conference Minister could become the bishop.

Within the early and medieval church, persons who were outside of these three orders found an outlet for ministry through monasticism. At first, men and women withdrew from society to lead a life devoted to prayer. Soon some of these prayer-athletes became teachers of others. In the late middle ages some monastic groups re-engaged with the world as preachers, teachers, and persons who care for the poor. Also some monastic groups developed “third orders” (monks were the first, nuns the second) of persons who followed the monastic disciplines to whatever extent possible while living in the world. This whole system developed independent of the three orders of clergy, although some monks did become priests.

B. Calvin’s plan: John Calvin had a different idea. He identified four offices of ministry found in the New Testament that applied to all times:

- pastor
- teacher
- elder
- deacon

The first two were ministries of the Word, requiring formal education. Elders were set apart for governance of the church. This included guarding the sacrament, which gave them authority over membership, as well as a pastoral role in confronting persons not living outwardly moral lives. The deacons were to care for the poor, which entailed handling the funds of the church for that purpose. Persons were ordained to all four offices.

These four offices have evolved in churches of the Reformed tradition (Reformed, Presbyterian, Congregational). Pastor and Teacher were considered professional clergy. In colonial New England the Teacher was, for all practical purposes, an associate pastor. As the supply of clergy dwindled, congregations called one person to be “pastor and teacher.” Presbyterian and Reformed churches had neither the supply of candidates nor the financial resources to support both offices, and the position of Teacher faded away.

Among Congregationalists the position of Elder, or “Ruling Elder” faded away, and the Deacons assumed the responsibilities of governance. Because of the peculiarities of church-state relations in New England, care of the physical property of

the congregation was entrusted to a different group; when congregations assumed this responsibility they elected Trustees. This left the deacons with the “spiritual concerns” of the congregation. Many congregations continue to have a Deacons Fund for the care of the poor.

In Reformed and Presbyterian churches, Elders and Deacons constituted the *consistory* or *session* with little distinction between them. In some cases a Deacon might “move up” to Elder. Elders often prepared communion and assisted in its distribution. The regional church was governed by a presbytery or classis, and Synod, where each congregation was represented by the pastor and an Elder. Following the union of the Reformed Church in the U.S. with the Evangelical Synod, the requirement that the lay delegate to Synod be an Elder was dropped.

In the late 19th and early 20th century, congregations adopted the practice of electing officers to a term of years, instead of life, and with term limits. Many congregations continue to consider an Elder or Deacon to be ordained for life, although they are an *active* Elder or Deacon for a term of years. Although not serving on the consistory, the “inactive” Elder may still be asked to assist with communion, or fulfill other duties. A person ordained to one of these offices in one congregation is not normally re-ordained if they move to another congregation.

II. Speculation on a Scriptural Pattern of Ministry

Every denomination has quoted Scripture to *prove* that their polity is the *right* polity. I am not going to do that. But I am going to cite Scripture for clues to what might be an effective organization for ministry for our place and time.

I suggest four categories of ministry;

- A. The ministry of all believers
- B. The ministry of gifts
- C. The ministry of leadership
- D. The ministry of supervision

A. The ministry of all believers

*you are a chosen race,
a royal priesthood
a holy nation*

*God's own people
that you may declare the wonderful deeds
of the one who called you out of darkness
into God's marvelous light
1 Peter 2:9*

Everyone who is called into a relationship with Jesus Christ is called into ministry. Confirmation is our ordination into ministry. Our individual ministries are many, including:

1. Family
2. Friends
3. Occupation
4. Volunteer activity
5. Citizenship
6. Church membership

1. Family: When I was pastor of five churches in North Dakota, and my wife went away to school, leaving me with full responsibility for our two children and a foster child, I wondered if I could do it all. After praying about this, I came to understand that my most important ministry was parenthood. If I couldn't do everything, my responsibility as a father came first. Raising my children is the most important thing I do in my life. They are my gift to the future. We each have ministries in our family relationships. In her last years of life, when my mother came to live with me, I realized the importance of my ministry as a son. Spouse, sibling, grandparent - these are all important ministries.

How we organize our household - our diet, our choices as consumers, how we deal with conflict, the place of God in our home - is all part of our family ministry.

2. Friendship: At my ordination anniversary, when people from my past were invited to write letters with memories, two persons wrote about my befriending them. I was surprised that they lifted up such ordinary actions. But I am very grateful for friends who were there when I needed them. Our close friends are important; friendship is a ministry.

3. Occupation: Every honorable occupation is a way of serving God. We work to provide the basic necessities of life - and some luxuries - to ourselves and our families. Hopefully our livelihood provides us with meaning. In our labor we see ways we serve

others and advance the common good. In the community that develops in the workplace we hopefully find mutual respect and even joy. If not, we need to change.

4. Volunteer work: Our involvement in our community may take many forms - mentoring children, fighting fires, working in a soup kitchen, supporting organizations that advocate for human rights, support of the arts, affirmation of nature - and on and on. These also are part of our ministry.

5. Citizenship: As citizens in a democracy we can participate in the political process. We can vote, petition, demonstrate, organize. When we keep clearly in mind God's kingdom of peace, justice and compassion, we are engaged in Christian ministry.

6. Church members: The reformers, when they advocated for the priesthood of all believers, thought first of the priest's duty to hear confession and grant absolution. Within the life of the church we can listen to each other, whether one-on-one or in small groups, and we can affirm each other. With all persons, but especially in the church, we are called to bear one another's burdens, to rejoice with those who rejoice, to weep with those who weep. We also support the church with our prayers, our presence, our gifts and our service.

B. The ministry of gifts

*To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.
 To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom,
 and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit,
 to another faith by the same Spirit,
 to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit,
 to another the working of miracles,
 to another prophecy,
 to another the discernment of spirits,
 to another various kinds of tongues,
 to another the interpretation of tongues.
 All these are activated by one and the same Spirit,
 who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses.
 1 Corinthians 12:7-11*

We might come up with a different list of gifts. But the point is, we are not all alike. We

have different abilities, interests and passions. We also have different personalities. In addition to the general ministry of all believers, we each have our own particular ministry. One person sings in the choir, another teaches Sunday school, yet another does the bookkeeping. Our gifts are diverse, but we each have gifts. One Sunday after worship I wrote down the following reflection on our service:

LITURGY

May 20, 2001

United Community Church of Cortland, New York

The word "liturgy" I am told means "work of the people." This morning's worship was truly the work of the people.

When I arrived at the church, John was mowing the lawn. "It needed it," he said.

I entered the worship area and saw that everything was neatly arranged and ready for worship—a major transformation from the rummage sale that filled the room yesterday—a transformation that required work from many hands.

I was about half way through practicing my sermon when Bob and Betty walked in. Bob had some things for coffee hour. The men were providing coffee hour after church today. John came in from mowing, washed his hands, and the three of us put the coffee on and prepared and arranged food.

Marina came in with her son Max, bringing the flowers for our service—lilacs and eight red roses. She explained that she brought one rose for each year since her husband's death in a traffic accident. They carefully—I would say prayerfully—arranged the flowers and placed them on the altar. After a little discussion, Mary Louise and Christyann found an appropriate white cloth and placed it on the altar under the flowers.

By then the children were arriving for Sunday School. In the "opening exercises" Sheralyn led them in singing and Betty played the piano. I wasn't there to see which two children received the honor of passing the collection plates. Then it was off to classes. Kim taught one class, Betty another, and I think Melody substituted as teacher in the third class.

I went to the music room for choir practice. Eight of us tuned up our voices and rehearsed the music for the day.

We went to the worship area where Andy handed me the clip-on mike and we adjusted it. We taped for the radio today. Andy handles all the electronic equipment and will edit the tape and prepare it for broadcast.

Five minutes before the service Christyann—my co-pastor—and the seven other choir members and I went to the next room and joined hands in prayer—then returned to our places. Bob and Dick were handing out programs and cheerfully greeting everyone. I could see that Mildred had placed a glass of water on the pulpit for me.

I could see through the little window into the kitchen that Gary had arrived with melons for our coffee hour.

Marina's prelude was beautiful, as usual. Our choir did our best with an introit. Wendy, our Lay Reader, offered a call to worship, and we all joined

together in two familiar songs, and prayed our invocation together.

Then the children came up front, about a dozen of them, and under Sheralyn's direction sang to us about Zaccheus.

Then Joyce, our Moderator, came forward with Betty (this is a different person from the other Betty). I joined them and we went through our service for receiving new members by reaffirmation of faith. Then I offered the greeting of peace, and we had the beautiful chaos as we all went around to greet each other. I'm confident that most of the people made a point of welcoming Betty, but I didn't see, as I snuck out to the kitchen to check on the melons. During this chaos, most of the younger children made their escape to the nursery. I think Joyce (a different Joyce) substituted for the girl who usually watches the nursery.

During the announcements Mary Louise thanked Marie and all the others who helped with the Rummage Sale, reported our profit, and we all clapped our approval.

After Wendy read the Scriptures, Christyann asked for prayer concerns. Several serious concerns were shared, and Christyann lifted them up, with other wider concerns, in prayer.

Our choir offered an Anthem as Dick and Bob passed the plates and all who wished contributed.

After a hymn, I shared a sermon, we sang again, I offered a benediction, and we all joined hands for the closing response.

The coffee hour table was soon moved into place, covered with food, the children enthusiastically reappeared—first in line—and the air was filled with conversation. Visitors were well greeted. Susan packed up the hymnals. Marian and Audrey went to another room to count the money and record everyone's contribution.

After socializing a while, I remembered there was supposed to be a Christian Education meeting after church. I went down the hall and found the meeting. The teachers had carefully examined several curriculum options for next year, discussed them, and made a selection.

I stopped in the kitchen. All the French Breakfast Puffs I brought for coffee hour were gone—I knew they'd be a hit. The container I brought them in was washed, and the kitchen cleaned up.

I left church knowing the door would lock behind me. Al always goes around after church to check all the doors and thermostats.

Liturgy is the work of the people. Our worship this morning was the fruit of the prayerful and thoughtful labors of many, many people.

How many and varied are our gifts! The above reflection is just about Sunday morning. Other gifts are exercised through the week, in the church and community.

3. The ministry of leadership

*From Miletus he [Paul] sent a message to Ephesus,
asking the elders of the church to meet him.
When they came to him, he said to them:*

*“ . . . Keep watch over yourselves
and over all the flock, of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers,
to shepherd the church of God that he obtained with the blood of his own Son.
Acts 20:17,18a,28*

The early church evidently organized itself like any other synagogue, selecting Elders to manage its affairs. Almost every organization selects leaders to manage its properties, funds, and other concerns. However, church Elders do not just take care of property. They are to “shepherd the church of God.” The *church* is *people*. Elders seek the spiritual and material well being of the congregation. They listen to complaints, clarify misunderstandings, and seek to resolve conflict. They must first, “keep watch over yourselves” - cultivate their own walk with God, in order to effectively care for the church of God.

I once served a UCC-PCUSA Union church as interim pastor. The UCC side was from the Congregational tradition. When they united, they adopted the Presbyterian form of government, with the ordination of Elders. I recall one person from the Congregational side, describing her feelings when she was ordained an Elder. She was deeply moved and felt that she truly had been set aside for ministry in her local church.

4. The ministry of supervision

Paul wrote to Timothy:

*You then, my child,
be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus;
and what you have heard from me through many witnesses
entrust to faithful people who will be able to teach others as well.
2 Timothy 2:1-2*

Evidently, as the early church organized itself, in addition to Elders in each congregation, they had people like Timothy and Titus, who supervised more than one congregation. Educated by other church leaders, they were to teach leaders who would in turn teach others. In this way, the teaching of the church would be passed on, to the whole church, and into the future. This person teaches the leaders of the church and counsels and guides them in their work. The supervisor must act with humility but with authority that comes from God. This responsibility requires a deep personal spiritual life.

*proclaim the message;
be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable;
convince,
rebuke,
and encourage,
with the utmost patience in teaching.
2 Timothy 4:2*

This person is first of all a teacher. This responsibility requires a solid education. When Paul is no longer in the background, it will be necessary for the supervisor to consult often with other supervisors, and to act collegially. As a minister to the spiritual growth of the church of God, this person must maintain a vital spiritual life.

Summary

The ministry of all believers belongs to every church member.

The ministry of gifts we associate with persons assigned to some specific task in the life of the church, although many gifts are exercised in an unstructured manner.

The ministry of leadership belongs to the members of the consistory/session or governing board of whatever name.

The ministry of supervision belongs to the pastor, who may serve one congregation, but will more often serve several congregations.

As “pastor-coordinator” of a five congregation parish in North Dakota, I often wondered what duties belonged uniquely to the pastor. The congregations were capable of running their own affairs, but truly appreciated having me around. Let me offer some tentative conclusions that may have some application to this discussion:

1. Many of the duties assumed by pastors in single-point charges could be done by church leaders.
2. The job of “coordinator” is something more - and less - than pastor. A coordinator mentors church leaders, inspires and encourages them. A coordinator may develop a sense of collegiality with church leaders. A coordinator delegates. A coordinator is not totally in control, but encourages initiatives that rise up from others.
3. I was a teacher, first of all to lay preachers, but in other settings as well.

4. I had a vision of the ministry and mission of the church and challenged our people to act in mission to our community and beyond.

III. Ministerial Formation

I see ministerial formation as having four elements. I believe these elements apply to every category of ministry:

- A. Intellectual formation
- B. Spiritual formation
- C. Practical formation
- D. Community formation

A. Intellectual formation: A faith community begins with a *story*. That story will shape how the community and its members see the world. The story transmits values that are lived in the life of the community. It is important for the Christian minister to know the story, to pass on the story, and to live out the implications of the story. That story is found in the study of the Bible, church history, and theology.

B. Spiritual formation: We teach, first of all, by how we live. Our lives will show forth the inner reality at the center of our being. Ministerial education must, first of all, cultivate this inner life. We seek unity with the holy, help in discernment, and the joy that is in God.

C. Practical formation: The work of ministry can be broken down into specific tasks. The ability to perform these tasks can be enhanced with training. Some instruction is helpful, followed by action-reflection learning.

D. Community formation: We are not *just* individuals; we are a community. We don't just teach and learn as individuals; but also as a community. It is important that we become a community, and belong to one another. Community is both how we learn and what we learn.

IV. Education for Ministry

It is important that the theological school, the regional church bodies, and the local congregations, work together and support one another. Education for the various categories of ministry sometimes blend into each other.

A. Education for the ministry of believers

The local church is the locus of education for the ministry of believers. The sermon and adult education provide *intellectual formation*.

The worship service and small groups for prayer, and counseling by the pastor provide *spiritual formation*. We also can grow as we share our spiritual journeys with each other in the congregation.

Large congregations may offer *practical formation* in programs, groups, or retreats that discuss marriage, parenthood, social issues and workplace ministry. However, these are more likely to be addressed on a regional level. Individual reading of books can also help.

The church is *community*, and the member grows in a sense of community through participation in the church. Fellowship opportunities with persons from other congregation (joint services, special events) can help to expand the member's understanding of community.

B. Education for the ministry of gifts

Some education will be received in a person's specific discipline, but not in all cases. For example, a congregation may expect a Music Director to have professional training in music. But anyone who loves to sing will usually be welcomed into a choir. The choir rehearsal then becomes the place where the choir member improves his or her musical gift.

Much *intellectual formation* occurs through the process of carrying out one's duties. The Sunday School teacher learns much about the Bible by being required to teach it. The choir members will incorporate into their being much of the teaching of the church by singing it.

Any exercise of gifts in the worship service can contribute to a person's *spiritual*

formation.

While members often have natural ability in their areas of service, their *practical formation* can be enhanced with mentoring within the congregation, reading, and training from the regional church. Regional support for church secretaries, financial officers, youth advisers, and others, can be provided through meetings, retreats, classes and on-line consultation. The action-reflection model is always important. It is of value to develop a sense of *community* on a regional level among persons exercising similar gifts. The sense of community that develops in a choir (along with a tolerance of bad jokes) is powerful.

C. Education for the ministry of leadership

We look to the consistory members as church leaders. However, choir directors, Sunday school superintendents, and other church officers may also be leaders. Often a community intuitively senses who its natural leaders are.

The leader must have a deeper understanding of *the story* than the average member. The Story shapes our actions, and through the decisions of leaders will shape the direction of the congregation. This calls for *intellectual formation*, education in *the story* beyond what the local congregation can offer. Courses offered through the theological school and regional body, on-line learning, reading and directed study are all useful tools. Related to learning the Story is coming to see the church as mission. A consciousness of mission must also be part of the leader's intellectual formation.

The *spiritual formation* of the leader is shaped by the congregation. This formation may be enhanced by some form of spiritual direction. Retreats and other events coordinated through the regional body can also help. The experiences of leading worship, teaching and preaching push the leader into a more intimate walk with God.

Practical formation includes understanding how the congregation functions, leadership skills, and the relation of the congregation to the larger church (church polity). These skills can be enhanced through courses offered on a regional level, reading, on-line learning, retreats, directed study, and participating in the regional church.

The leader's sense of *community* grows in the life of the congregation, in the bonding that occurs in the consistory, and in participation in the larger church. The

church leader has an important responsibility in connecting the congregation to the larger church. The leader can grow in a sense of community through the fellowship found in taking courses together and participation in the regional meetings of the church.

D. Education for the ministry of supervision

The supervisor is, first of all, a minister of the Word. The *intellectual formation* of the pastor is essential, and is preferably done under the direction of a school of theology. The Pastor must be well grounded in Bible, Church History and Theology. Education can continue after seminary through courses, reading, and peer group Bible/lectionary study.

The *spiritual formation* of the pastor can continue with spiritual direction, either one-on-one or in a group. Devotional reading is also of value, as are spiritual retreats and the development of spiritual disciplines.

The *practical* aspects of ministry (Preaching, Worship, Education, Counseling, Administration) need to be taught in the theological school in cooperation with local “teaching parishes” to insure adequate use of action-reflection learning. Mentoring in one’s first parish is also important. Peer groups for discussing parish issues can also be both useful and healthful. It will also be helpful to identify pastors with expertise in certain areas, who can advise other pastors and church leaders.

The pastoral ministry cannot be carried out without a sense of *community*. The pastor needs to develop a sense of collegiality with church leaders. Clergy need to find community in their fellowship together. The larger church, experienced in its regional bodies, is family, and a responsibility pastors dare not neglect.

Next steps: These are my thoughts and mine alone.

1. For effective education for ministry the theological school, regional body and local church need to intensify their communication and cooperation.
2. Questions for the theological school:
 - a. Are you preparing students to become pastors of multiple-point charges?
 - b. Are you preparing students to become pastor-coordinators - not

- just ministers, but coordinators of the ministry carried out by many?
- c. Are you encouraging in your students a vision of the church as mission, rather than the church as institution?
3. Questions for the regional bodies:
 - a. Are you promoting the mentoring of new pastors, clergy support groups, and continuing education?
 - b. Are you striving to create multiple-point charges adequate in size to support a pastor?
 - c. Are you encouraging the fellowship of persons with specific gifts?
 - d. Can you identify clergy with specific gifts, who can mentor other clergy and church leaders?
 - e. Will you promote the ordination of deacons and elders?
 4. Questions for theological schools and regional bodies together:
 - a. Can you develop - and market - courses for church leaders?
 - b. Can you identify teaching parishes appropriate to the situation a student is most likely to encounter upon graduation?
 5. Questions for the local congregation:
 - a. Are you willing to move beyond maintenance to mission?
 - b. Will you experiment in doing more with other congregations?
 - c. Are you willing to embrace all of the categories of ministry?
 - d. Can you, at the same time, do more yourselves as lay people, and appreciate more the gifts and role of your pastor?