

Disciplined Conversations, Faithful Practices: Practical Theology and the Education of Lay Ecclesial Ministers

Maureen O'Brien, Ph.D.

O'Brien, Maureen. "Disciplined Conversations, Faithful Practices," originally published in Bert Roebben and Michael Warren (eds.), *Religious Education as Practical Theology*. Leuven: Peeters Press, 2001, pp. 273-306. Reprinted with permission.

Introduction:

This article, originally written for an international audience, outlines and advocates for a "practical theology" paradigm in the education of lay ecclesial ministers in the United States. Section 1 provides an overview of the emergence of lay ecclesial ministry in the U.S., citing studies by Zeni Fox, Philip Murnion and David DeLambo, and the work of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. The significant institutions and patterns influencing the development of lay ecclesial ministers, such as parish, family, socio-economic status, clerical culture, professional associations, ministry education-formation programs, and American professional culture are described. Section 2 draws on the literature of professional socialization to discuss the relatively "diffuse" character of the formation and socialization of lay ecclesial ministers as compared with other professionals, and names other factors that contribute to the difficulties experienced by many of these ministers in determining their identity and mission. A review of some contemporary themes and theorists in adult education then highlights the role of critical thinking and the cultivation of learning communities as fostering transformative learning. The article proposes that these interdisciplinary sources can illuminate approaches to the education of lay ecclesial ministers in ways that foster both "formation" and "transformation."

In the following excerpts from Sections 3 and 4 (pp. 290-295 and 301-306), theological reflection and practical theology provide the foundation for developing a model of ministry education as "disciplined conversation," leading to "faithful practices" by lay ecclesial ministers.

3. Practical Theology for Ministry Education

"If transformation depends so fundamentally on formation, then the Church's job is to form the Church *for* transformation. And that means to form *the world* for transformation. . . . the business of the Church, as people-who-know-they-are-the-Church, is to provide (within the limits imposed by the limits of the influence of her actual members) the type of formation that is suited to transformation. . . . Transformation is something that happens, and nobody can lay it on to order. We can only create opportunities for it"⁵³.

Rosemary Haughton's classic statement shapes my articulation of the purpose and goal of practical theology as an educational paradigm for lay ecclesial ministers. In what follows, I will briefly present some common understandings of practical theology in the United States context. Then, drawing on the insights from the literature of professional socialization and adult education, I will offer my understanding of practical theology as promoting *formation* into an owned ministerial identity for learning subjects through the *transformative* activity of disciplined conversation, leading in turn to more faithful practices in multiple contexts in church and society.

⁵³ R. HAUGHTON, *The Transformation of Man: A Study of Conversion and Community*, Paramus, NJ, Paulist Press Deus Books, 1967, p. 252.

Theological Reflection

Facility in “theological reflection” is increasingly regarded as a key competency for ministry. As with “principles of adult learning”, theological reflection is named as a requirement for ministry formation programs in the standards of the United States Catholic Conference Commission on Certification and Accreditation⁵⁴. It can, however, connote many different things to different people. In its most elementary form, it may mean any prayerful reflection on the relation of one’s faith to one’s life experience. As used in ministry education, theological reflection most commonly involves a process, usually in a group, through which a current, specific, personal, and important experience⁵⁵ from one’s life and/or ministry is chosen and probed to discover how God may be encountered in its midst. Bringing the resources of Christian tradition and the contemporary experience of Christians together in this reflection is meant to lead to new insight and pastoral action. R. L. Kinast and J.D. and E.E. Whitehead have developed “portable” and widely used models for use in ministry⁵⁶.

This sort of experience-based theological reflection bears strong similarities to the praxis oriented work of religious education, rooted in the pedagogy of Paulo Freire and brought to preeminent expression in the United States by Thomas Groome. The “shared Christian praxis” approach developed by Groome proposes five basic movements:

- naming/expressing a present action as experienced by the community
- engaging in critical reflection on this action
- bringing forth the Christian “Story” (expressed in Scripture, tradition, ritual and other forms) and “Vision” (mandates arising from the Story to empower the praxis of Christians) appropriate to the present action
- bringing the critical insights on present action into hermeneutical dialogue with the Christian Story and Vision
- making decisions for Christian living as shaped by the critical conversation of the preceding movements⁵⁷.

Practical Theology

In recent years, several key developments have helped to bring the power and potential of theological reflection into sharper focus and to explore its congruence with religious education. One has been the new attention to “practical” or “pastoral” theology⁵⁸. As elaborated preeminently by Farley⁵⁹, theological education has too sharply divided the academic study of

⁵⁴ UNITED STATES CATHOLIC CONFERENCE COMMISSION ON CERTIFICATION AND ACCREDITATION, *Accreditation Handbook For Ministry Formation Programs* (n. 41), Standard 3.4, p. 8.

⁵⁵ R. L. KINAST, *Let Ministry Teach: A Guide to Theological Reflection*, Collegeville, MN, Liturgical Press, 1996, pp. 2-4.

⁵⁶ See *ibid.* and J. D. and E.E. WHITEHEAD, *Method in Ministry: Theological Reflection and Christian Ministry*, Kansas City, Sheed and Ward, 1995.

⁵⁷ T. H. GROOME, *Sharing Faith: A Comprehensive Approach to Religious Education and Pastoral Ministry*, HarperSanFrancisco, 1991, pp. 146-148.

⁵⁸ I prefer “practical theology” because it more effectively connotes a praxis oriented process as well as a broadening of the church’s concerns to the experiences of the world rather than remaining concentrated on intraecclesial, “pastoral” matters.

⁵⁹ E. FARLEY, *Theologia: The Fragmentation and Unity of Theological Education*, Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1983.

Bible, church history and systematic theology from their “application” in the traditional practical theological disciplines such as pastoral care, religious education, liturgical leadership, and preaching. In an alternative framework, practical theology has been presented as the overarching sensibility for all theological endeavors. Instead of one-way transmission of truth to ministerial practitioners and the Christian faithful from scholarly experts, a practical theology scheme envisions the enrichment of all discourse about God—in academy, church, family, work and world—through the following commitments:

- By drawing on the experience of “ordinary” Christians in the particularity of their culture and historical situation, theology is necessarily contextualized.
- By contextualized and ongoing reflection in a variety of Christian communities, theology is challenged to rethink supposedly universal assumptions and to wrestle with tensions in ways that lead to new insights⁶⁰.
- All Christians are encouraged to understand themselves as “doing theology” when they engage in theological reflection.
- Some persons (ministers and/or academicians) will assume roles as “practical theologians” in mediating between the ongoing reflection and ministry of Christian communities and the academy⁶¹.
- The processes used in the traditionally “practical” (particularly religious education) and the traditionally “scholarly” disciplines of theology will be rethought for their congruence with this model.
- Thus the theological enterprise as a whole will be reconceived⁶².

Don Browning’s “fundamental” formulation of practical theology as a reconception of the entire theological enterprise situates the traditional theological disciplines within the practical framework. In the phase of descriptive theology, we attempt to arrive at a “thick” description of a concrete situation by examining the prevailing understandings of the community’s (faith-based) vision, obligational norms, human tendencies and needs, environmental-social constraints, and specific rules and roles, with extensive use of the social sciences as integral to this descriptive process. Through historical theology, the questions arising from practice are brought to the foundational texts of Christian tradition to surface insights from our past in relation to our present dilemmas. Then, in the moment of systematic theology, there is a hermeneutical “fusion of horizons between the vision implicit in contemporary practices and the vision implied in the practices of the normative Christian texts”⁶³, creating new meanings for our situation. Finally, strategic practical theology brings the insights of the previous three movements—always

⁶⁰ Lombaerts names one of the three dimensions of catechetics as “the endless probing of the symbolic character of the Judeo-Christian tradition. This symbol system reflects the dynamic and shifting interaction between an unchanging core of divine revelation and the actual social contexts of particular times and places” in LOMBAERTS, FSC, *Catechetics and the Formation of Catechists* (n. 1), p. 179, and acknowledges the difficulty of this task in a pluralistic world

⁶¹ R. P. IMBELLI and T.H. GROOME, *Signposts Towards a Pastoral Theology*, in *Theological Studies* 53 (1992), p. 137.

⁶² As Lombaerts notes in discussing catechetics, in such an understanding the catechist and the theologian will be speaking the same message: LOMBAERTS, FSC, *Catechetics and the Formation of Catechists* (n. 1), p. 190.

⁶³ D.S. BROWNING, *A Fundamental Practical Theology: Descriptive and Strategic Proposals*, Minneapolis, MN, Fortress Press, 1991, p. 51.

understood as part of the overall practical enterprise—together in the attempt to frame faithful and effective responses to our concrete situations today⁶⁴.

Browning names this as a critical correlational process, indebted to the work of David Tracy, and draws on Tracy's definition of practical theology as "the mutually critical correlation of the interpreted theory and praxis of the Christian faith with the interpreted theory and praxis of the contemporary situation"⁶⁵. With this emphasis on hermeneutics and critical thinking, Browning thus points us squarely toward the promise and potential of practical theology to change our perspectives, as individuals and as churches, and thus to change our practices. Parallels with critical thinking and transformation in adult education are evident; see, for example, Brookfield's phases of critical thinking described in Section 2.

A key question for educators, then, is how does one gain facility in practical theological reflection? Drawing on the components implied in the schemes of Groome, Browning and Tracy, we can infer that those who wish to gain proficiency will need:

- a personal and spiritual disposition characterized by self-awareness, prayerfulness, openness, and the ability to reconstruct one's practices in light of new evidence
- ongoing engagement in practices that yield rich experiences where God may be encountered
- ability to choose appropriately evocative experiences for reflection
- sufficient knowledge of contemporary experience and culture to be able to interpret one's experience, guided by accurate information as well as awareness of diverse experiences beyond one's own (requiring familiarity with social sciences)
- facility in interpretation of experience in light of social sciences and diversity of contemporary experiences
- sufficient knowledge of the prominent "facts" of the Christian "Story"—as known through Scripture, sacraments, ritual, images, bodily experience and other sources—and the diversity of interpretations which have shaped that Story
- facility in interpretation of the Christian Story by drawing on understandings of contemporary experience and culture in dialogue with it
- facility in holding this interpretive process in tension with present realities in order to imagine new possibilities for faithful practice
- sufficient skills training to engage in specific areas of ministry to which one is called, while situating the creative performance of ministerial practices within a creative reworking of these practices in line with the new interpretive insights gained through reflection facility in sustaining dialogue with multiple partners and texts for the sake of action⁶⁶.

The desired "competency" for practical theologians—including Christian ministers—can be summed up as "practical wisdom" or *phronesis*. Through acquiring the abilities listed above, persons become skilled in an ongoing process of reflection-in-action that derives its moral vision from the Christian tradition/Story—particularly, as maintained by Groome, from the values

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, especially pp. 47-58.

⁶⁵ D. TRACY, *Foundations of Practical Theology*, in *Practical Theology*, ed. D. BROWNING, San Francisco, Harper and Row, 1983, 61-82, p. 76.

⁶⁶ Cf. this list with the four interpretive skills needed by catechists: LOMBAERTS, FSC, *Catechetics and the Formation of Catechists* (n. 1), p. 187: "to discern the influence of the context; to listen to what Christians are saying; to foresee the skills that will be needed; to evaluate".

embedded in Jesus' vision of the Reign of God⁶⁷—and engages in a dynamic reinterpretation of that tradition in ways that will advance the Reign of God for the world in which we live. It is a process that is necessarily critical in that it brings the evidence of new experience to challenge our prevailing assumptions, and continually pushes us toward imagining new alternatives. And as Lombaerts puts it, such wisdom is “a quality proper to faith in itself . . . sustained by the action of the Spirit”⁶⁸.

Commitment to practical theology, then, is both profoundly formative and transformative. Its participants are practicing its approach in order to be formed in a disposition, or habitus, for ongoing practice that is characterized by practical wisdom. Explicit within the formation, however, is the commitment to transformation: the very nature of critical correlation leads to changed perspectives and, most proponents would insist, such change is not valid unless it also results in changed practices. As Haughton's words remind us, however, we cannot command transformation; thus the importance of a formation that is most conducive to the possibility of transformation.

Using practical theology as both a tool and a goal, then, let us bring together the insights of professional socialization and adult education with the situation of lay ecclesial ministers to discover the possibilities and limitations for this group's development in practical wisdom.

.....

4. Ministry Education and Practical Theology

1. *The activity of practical theology is “disciplined conversation” leading to “faithful practices”.*

In another essay, I stressed four key elements for such conversation: 1) an attitude of spiritual discernment that assumes God's word and work in the reflective process and adopts conversational “ground rules” establishing openness to that word; 2) viewing discipline as guided by *discipleship*: Christian faith as committed to keeping the Christian tradition as a privileged partner in the conversation; 3) keeping all necessary partners in the conversation: human participants with a “stake” in the outcome, prior and conflicting interpretations of the situation, experiences of the participants and others, understandings of the contextual situatedness of all participants, and so on; and 4) taking regular “pauses” to account for the voices not heard in the conversation—the “null curriculum”—and to critically think about our own thinking processes. At the same time that it is disciplined, however, such conversation will also be fluid and even playful, engaging imagination and intuition along with cognition to allow the breaking through of new possibilities⁶⁹.

This conversation is meant to result in *faithful practices*. As Browning notes, our practices remain relatively given and unreflected upon until they are found to be wanting. What Schon calls “espoused theories,” the conventional wisdom on how professionals accomplish their work, are unchallenged until they are ineffective in solving problems. Practical theology assumes

⁶⁷ T. H. GROOME, *Sharing Faith* (n. 57), especially pp. 14-18.

⁶⁸ LOMBAERTS, FSC, *Catechetics and the Formation of Catechists* (n. 1), p. 181.

⁶⁹ M.R. O'BRIEN, *Theology That Is Practical: The Model for the Next Millennium*, in *Theological Explorations* 1 (1999)

<<http://www.duq.edu/liberalarts/undertheology/ejournal/obrien.html>> (31 May 2000).

An important missing “voice” throughout the present essay is that of diverse cultures; I must acknowledge my own embeddedness in the white, middle class, North American piece of the ministry conversation, and invite collaborative discourse with a larger and more diverse group in order to honor my own commitment to the model advocated here.

On “playfulness” in practical theology, see T.A. VELING, “*Practical Theology*”: *A New Sensibility for Theological Education*, in *Pacifica* 11 (June 1998), especially p. 205.

that ministerial practices may also develop a quality of givenness, and educators may come to teach techniques unreflectively. Through disciplined conversation, inadequacies and unfaithfulness are brought to the surface and the practices are reinterpreted to allow for new practices, more attuned to the mission of Christian disciples as they face the particular issues of their various communities. As Chopp names it, theological education is not merely professional training, but the involvement of subjects in doing theology: “about ‘saving work,’ the emancipatory praxis of God and of Christian community in the world”⁷⁰.

2. *Ministry educators should strive for a thematic and methodological continuity between their own educational practices, the approach of practical theology, and the ministerial practices of their students.*

Practical theology, a praxis oriented education, and authentic practices in ministry itself are congruent in aim and approach. Groome’s work provides a notable example of a praxis approach originally conceived for the particular work of religious educators, then explicitly translated into a comprehensive approach to all of pastoral ministry and a thought system appropriate to the entire theological enterprise⁷¹. In their program design, ministry educators should continually incorporate “texts” in which their own teaching and the reflective practices they encourage in student ministers have the same contours as the ministerial styles they expect those ministers to incorporate⁷². Further, they should evaluate their own effectiveness with such continuity in mind.

3. *Ministry educators can encourage critical thinking in a practical theological mode with lay ecclesial ministers by fostering increased self-awareness.*

One aspect of this awareness, per Brookfield, is helping people to see how they learn to be critical thinkers: reflecting on one’s own learning style and looking at ways to adapt it in changed circumstances; understanding their motivations in learning activities and how they integrate new learning into existing analytical frameworks; discerning how they work alone and with others, how they adjust for their weaknesses and emphasize their strengths in learning⁷³.

A related concern is the ministers’ own perception of what they “need” to become effective, and of their own areas of greatest potential growth. Ministry educators can use frequent pedagogical exercises to encourage the articulation of pre-understandings, uncovering of assumptions, identification of the most significant images, stories, metaphors, and experiences that shape ministers’ self-understanding, and introduction of new alternatives in each of these areas.

4. *Ministry education must create specific contexts for disciplined conversation while empowering ministers to similar creations in their diverse contexts.*

Bucher and Stelling conclude from their research on socialization that “role-playing”—the concrete practice of the role that trainees will play upon completion of their training—is by far the most important of the “situational variables” in professional training. When trainees

⁷⁰ CHOPP, *Saving Work* (n. 82), p. 77.

⁷¹ GROOME, *Sharing Faith* (n. 57) is a preeminent example of this congruence. Browning comments that his and Groome’s approaches both hold that “the structure of theological reflection and the dynamics of Christian education should be the same”, in BROWNING, *A Fundamental Practical Theology* (n. 63), p. 218.

⁷² Besides drawing on practical theological reflection models, ministry education can profitably use similar approaches from adult education and higher education literature, notably sources such as those cited in this essay.

⁷³ BROOKFIELD, *Developing Critical Thinkers* (n. 47), pp. 82-85.

perceive that they are doing things that real professionals do, and are given responsibility in doing them, such activities help trainees gain a sense of mastery in the field⁷⁴. Thus the “role-playing” of practical theological reflection should receive attention throughout a ministry education program.

However, due to the diversity of ministries and of ministers’ own circumstances, it is foolhardy for ministry educators to assume that they are sponsoring the most meaningful and highly valued knowledge communities for student ministers. Recognizing, as per the wisdom of professional socialization literature, that they play only one part in the formation of ministers, they should offer a “portable” paradigm for practical theological reflection and challenge student ministers to find the most appropriate venue to practice it in their own, various contexts. Since many lay ecclesial ministers study part-time while continuing with ministry and other life commitments, educators should draw upon this situation as advantageous for ongoing role-playing in practical theological reflection. Consistent with the wisdom of Christian spirituality that disciples need spiritual “disciplines”—regular prayer and opportunities for ascetic practices—in order to foster the *habitus* of prayer throughout daily activities, ministry educators can advocate the discipline of doing practical theological conversation in a committed and “substantive”⁷⁵ community in order that ministers acquire it as a daily disposition. The value of the practical theology approach will be tested in its implementation, not only in graduate seminars, but in adult Bible study groups, peer networking of lay ecclesial ministers, liturgical preaching, one-to-one pastoral encounters—the many formal and informal opportunities that ministers have to invite growth in those they serve and to seek growth themselves⁷⁶.

At the same time, ministry educators must be sensitive to “safety” issues for ministers as they seek to bring a practical theological perspective to their ministry. The kind of critically interpretive and correlational thinking and conversation being encouraged by educators may threaten established practices in the faith communities served by the ministers. As Schon notes, workers often will not voice a critique of official “espoused theories” even though they are actually using their own internal constructions, called “theories-in-use,” to address problems effectively⁷⁷. The pressures of church authorities to conform to official “espoused theories” may push practical theological reflection underground or make it impossible to sustain in some contexts. Thus an important aspect of practical wisdom for ministry will be the prudential judgments necessary about the appropriate balance of equilibrium and disequilibrium—of attention to formation and to transformation—that is most appropriate for the communities in which one ministers as well as for one’s own flourishing in ministry.

⁷⁴ BUCHER and STELLING, *Becoming Professional* (n. 31), pp. 266-268.

⁷⁵ CHOPP, *Saving Work* (n. 82), pp. 65-66, draws on Sandel’s valuable distinction between the desirable “substantive” community and the “sentimental” and “associational” types, which do not sponsor members toward critical reflection and transformation. From M.J. SANDEL, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982, pp. 140-148. See also my article, M.R. O’BRIEN, *How We Are Together: Educating for Group Self-Understanding in the Congregation*, in *Religious Education* 92 (1997), pp. 315-331, on the characteristics of “community” as distinguished from “primary group” and “association”.

⁷⁶ See L. M. ENGLISH, *Informal and Incidental Teaching Strategies in Lay-Led Parishes*, in *Religious Education* 94 (Summer 1999), 300-312.

⁷⁷ Schon as cited in BROOKFIELD, *Developing Critical Thinkers* (n. 47), pp. 151-157.

5. *Ministry educators should consciously seek to “enlarge”⁷⁸ ministers’ perspectives beyond the ecclesial through practical theological reflection.*

By incorporating the perspectives of various disciplines besides Christian theological tradition, ministry educators acknowledge their own assumption that ministers need more inclusive, permeable perspectives because:

- Christian tradition insists that God is found in all things, not only in the church, and so expertise and enthusiasm to search for God in all things is necessary;
- ministers and all humans are subjects worthy of full development, and such development implies ever more complex understandings of interrelationships among the many institutions shaping our existence. As Brookfield puts it: “we believe that out of such experiences come self-insight and more satisfactory lives. We regard those adults who exhibit contextual awareness, reflective skepticism, and imaginative speculation, and who can identify and analyze the assumptions by which they are living, as somehow more developed, mature, or adult”⁷⁹;
- they minister in a pluralistic world;
- such a perspective is essential for commitment to the common good.

6. *Ministry educators from all contexts—seminaries, universities, diocesan and other formation programs—and involved in the education of all ministers—lay, ordained, and religious—must themselves engage in practical theological dialogue.*

A frequently voiced tension in the United States is the difficulty that lay ecclesial ministers and clergy experience in collaborating, given that their formation for ministry has been so different and separately conducted. Further, lay ecclesial ministers find that others not only have varied perceptions of who the lay minister is, but also of what they should know and do. Pastors, diocesan agencies, parishioners, and professional associations form diverse judgments on “how much” theology, spiritual formation, and training in technical skills the minister should have. Ministry formation programs have their own strengths and weaknesses in what they are able to provide. The Lay Ministry Subcommittee states that “dialogue among the various agencies . . . would be helpful to ensure the best use of resources and the provision of quality programs for prospective lay ministers”⁸⁰. Critical and imaginative conversation in the mode of practical theology would help educators to clarify and openly acknowledge some of the texts and subtexts relevant to their vision of formation for their group of ministers. And the process of clarification could then invite change and reacculturation—as adult educators remind us, a process fraught with discomfort and even pain, but ultimately open to more faithful practices.

Ministry educators in dialogue also should find non-threatening ways to surface the “subtexts” of student ministers’ responses to the education programs in order to identify congruities and contradictions with their own intent. As McCarthy reminds ministry educators

⁷⁸ DALOZ, KEEN, KEEN, and PARKS, *Common Fire* (n. 79), speak of “a constructive, enlarging engagement with the other”—with those not part of our own community or tribe—as “the single most important pattern we have found in the lives of people committed to the common good”, p. 63.

⁷⁹ BROOKFIELD, *Developing Critical Thinkers* (n. 47), p. 113.

⁸⁰ SUBCOMMITTEE ON LAY MINISTRY, *Lay Ecclesial Ministry* (n. 3), p. 26. As the follow-up to a conference among ministry educators sponsored by the Association of Graduate Programs in Ministry (AGPIM), an instrument to foster such dialogue within dioceses and regions was developed: *The Socialization of Professional Ministers: A Structured Dialogue for Leaders of Professional Ministry Training and Formation Programs, Based on a Presentation by Dr. Rose Yunker*, n.d.

about themselves: “We already have fully developed assumptive worlds which will impact what we see, hear, and think, and what we fail to see, hear, or think. These multiple histories which we bring to every endeavor shape our engagements and are the source of the ‘old myths that continue to whisper’ to us”⁸¹.

The emergence of lay ecclesial ministry is an occasion of grassroots transformation of the practices of the Roman Catholic church. The resulting formation, of the ministers and of the church as a whole, is still at a very early stage. As the exciting work of practical theology continues in response to this phenomenon, we do well to heed the reminder of Lombaerts: “The start of the ecclesial tradition shows circumstances that highlight the revealing power of the person of Christ. Throughout its history, all sorts of circumstances have led the church to turn toward the area of uncertainty as part of the historical character of a mystery focused on the radically “other.” This turn to mystery actually accompanied the work of defining, in a disciplined and authoritative manner, both correct teaching and the code of right living”⁸². As we live in uncertainty, yet we contemplate mystery and move, through disciplined conversation, to practices more faithful to the Reign of God and the One who proclaims it to us.

Department of Theology
Duquesne University
600 Forbes Ave.
Pittsburgh, PA 15282
E-mail: obrien@duq.edu

Maureen R. O’Brien, Ph.D.

⁸¹ McCARTHY, *Response to Dr. Rose Yunker’s Presentation*, (n. 73), p. 37.

⁸² LOMBAERTS, FSC, *Catechetics and the Formation of Catechists* (n. 1), p. 184.