

# **Spiritual Formation for Ministry**

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In this brief address, I first want to interpret the context which calls for a new attentiveness to spiritual formation for ministry, and then in the second section, I want to describe the contours of this formation and suggest some ways in which seminaries and the resources that your centers offer can contribute to this process. Indeed, we must be partners in this all important work..

### Setting the Context

Spiritual formation is not a term one would have typically heard at mainline seminaries (not to mention evangelical seminaries) 25 years ago, but now it is a subject of much discussion and activity. In 1996 the Association of Theological Schools even added spiritual formation to the criteria for seminary accreditation. Theological educators as well as folk working in the field of ministry development know all too well that there is no substitute for intentional spiritual formation for ministry. Whose responsibility is it, anyway?

In a recent *Christian Century* interview with Dan Aleshire, executive director of ATS, he made this observation about what is expected of seminaries in these days:

Clearly, there has been a change in the ecology of ministerial call and formation. More of it is located in the life of the seminary, [whereas formerly it was located in the church]...Seminaries are trying to figure out how to be appropriately rigorous intellectual environments, while at the same time they are being asked to provide remedial work on what it means to be a believer before God and a community of believers...<sup>1</sup>

In other words, the task of spiritual formation for ministry has basically been transplanted from the church (perhaps with the exception of some African-American congregations) to the seminary. Thus, we are called to address certain key questions necessary to effective functioning in ministry: 1) How can we assist students in being intentional about maturing in faith? 2) How can we convey that being spiritually centered greatly contributes to leading a community of faith? Margaret Miles contends that the great need of both church and society in the late twentieth century is for Christian adulthood. Thus, "...a balance of attitudes of gratitude and responsibility, not infancy and dependency needs to be cultivated and strengthened."<sup>2</sup> Churches are always quick to lay blame for ineffective ministers at the doorsteps of the seminary; if we have not been intentional about holistic formation and particularly attentive to who students are *becoming*, perhaps we deserve such blame.

Spiritual formation must be a high priority for seminaries in our day because of the kinds of students who are matriculating. The average student is older and often lacks the kind of careful catechesis in a tradition of which they have been a life-long participant. Thus, there is some remedial work to do in basic biblical literacy and practices of the faith tradition, as well as introducing them to the intellectual heritage of Christianity. Church vocation was probably not where they had been originally headed, and now they come later in life, bearing scars from their circuitous journey. Many come to us broken by their corporate ambition that did not satisfy their deepest hunger; many have sustained failure in their relationships and want to become whole again; others have a sense of inchoate

longing for God that they believe theological studies can assuage. Our task, in many respects, is to help them recover a sense of direction that offers a meaningful and healing pathway.

Besides this shift in the student population, it is getting harder to recruit good students. In a recent address to chief academic officers of seminaries and divinity schools<sup>3</sup>, Barbara G. Wheeler, president of Auburn Theological Seminary, notes the decline in quality students entering seminary: In 1947, 7% of Phi Beta Kappa went into medicine and 7% went into ministry. In 1987, 15% went into medicine, and less than 1% went into ministry. Only the significant growth in numbers of women and minorities have maintained the quality. I am not suggesting that academic proficiency is the only indicator of aptitude for ministry; however, the formation process of theological education is enhanced by a nimble acumen that allows for a high level of self-awareness in integrating professional and spiritual requirements for ministry.

Formation for ministry also bumps up against the way our society views professions. Whereas one's profession used to be a whole identity, the contemporary commodification renders one a "seller of services." It is no longer who you are, but what you do; in the words of Wheeler, "occupation and vocation are coming apart."<sup>4</sup> Perhaps more than any other profession, ministry is about holding these together. People look to ministers to "tell them how to live" and, more important, model it as well. I would imagine that many who seek your guidance have accommodated themselves to their parish's expectation that they are responsible for marketing the Gospel with all the hype of Madison Avenue--and they have lost their souls in the process. Further, because of the profound worry over the dislocation of

mainline Protestant churches in North American culture, ministers are tempted to deny their personal limits in trying to stave off this reality. Vocation and occupation have come apart, and many leave vocation ministry emotionally drained and rather cynical about the call to pastoral work. One cannot be a steward of the mysteries of grace if he or she is not deeply acquainted with merciful resources beyond himself or herself. Only the rich springs of a vital, nourished faith—a spirituality that continues to be formed--can water the ground that becomes parched amidst the challenges of ministry.

### The Nature of Spiritual Formation for Ministry

With this context in mind, what is the nature of spiritual formation for ministry and how do we serve as midwives of grace for those in our care? Listen to this definition:

Spiritual formation is the continuing work of God's Spirit in the life of the believer in the context of Christian community. As Christ is formed within, each Christian is equipped and empowered to fulfill God's call to ministry (*diakonia*), to worship (*leitourgia*), and to participate in community (*koinonia*) which builds up the whole Body of Christ.<sup>5</sup>

First, it is absolutely essential that we recognize that the primary work of formation belongs to the Spirit of God. In his recent work *The Source of Life*, Jurgen Moltmann, reminds us that the Spirit is at work in human lives in this manner:

We cannot make the fruit of the Spirit..we have to wait expectantly

for it, and let it grow, as fruit ripens on a tree.<sup>6</sup>

This indicates that spiritual formation is not one more form of “self help” with which we are all so familiar. It radically depends upon divine help! Perhaps John Wesley strikes the proper balance between the work of the Holy Spirit and the industry of the individual. He encourages the Christian to spare no effort in being receptive and cooperative with the Holy Spirit’s sanctifying work.<sup>7</sup> Lest we be overly dependent upon our diligence, Diogenes Allen cautions: “we must remember that God is as fully active and present in our lives when we are making an effort as when we are not.”<sup>8</sup> It might be helpful to both students and ministers for us to tell them to relax a bit; God is at work in and through your life even when you do not perceive it. We need to talk more about receptivity than achievement.

One of the primary means the Spirit uses is, of course, the Christian community. We are “ecclesial Christians,” a term I have borrowed from Edward Farley. A couple of winters ago it was really cold in Kansas City, and a portion of the Missouri River had frozen there, as well as further upstream. As it began to melt, I made a trip over to a nearby walking path to see it breaking up. I saw the most unusual thing: large ice disks were moving down stream, spinning as they went, moving along in concert together. I had expected jagged chunks to be clogged, impeding movement. What I concluded was this: the chunks bump into each other as they move along and round off the sharp edges. Such is the work of Christian community; it is a means of formation. Hence the seminary, the development center, the church, must be

very careful about the kind of culture it creates.

A recent work, *Being There*, details how a seminary’s culture shapes the formational process. A seminary’s culture is defined as

Those shared symbolic forms--worldviews and beliefs, ritual practices, ceremonies, art and architecture, language, and patterns of everyday interaction--that give meaning and direction to the life of the schools and the people who participate in them.<sup>9</sup>

The curriculum, thus, is much larger than what is taught in the classroom (as our old educational professors always told us!). The ethos of the community is the medium for formative work. The graces of professorial hospitality, staff attentiveness, students “bearing one another’s burdens,” shared worship and meals, are essential to spiritual formation in community. A spiritual landscape is constructed and those who dwell there for a season are formed for good..or, sadly at times, for ill. Students who have been belittled or have not been extended constructive pastoral care while in theological studies have often wreaked havoc on their former institutions when they came to positions of denominational power.

The Spirit of God and the character of the community are the first two essential ingredients in forming persons for ministry. The fledgling (or not so fledgling) minister has her or his part to do also. I encourage my students to recognize the “unfinished” nature of their identity as Christians and vocational ministers. “It doth not yet appear what we shall be..” Often those newly called to ministry live with a stern perfectionism that has little room for

growth, learning from mistakes, and realistic expectations. Roberta Bondi reminds us that when the desert monastics interpreted “Be ye therefore perfect as God is perfect” they understood that this meant no more than that a person be willing to change. And we should be content with small changes. Bondi writes “Inability to make changes in our lives unless they are radical and sweeping often comes from a kind of all-or-nothing thinking that is perfectionistic.”<sup>10</sup>

Learning to pay attention is critical to spiritual formation. Only when we take time to center ourselves in the presence of God can we learn what we need to address. Simone Weil said that “attention is the only faculty that gives us access to God.” Bonhoeffer reminds us that if we cannot listen to our brother or sister, it is not likely that we can listen to God either.

Assessment is the pressing concern of accrediting agencies and denominational judicatories. You are a significant part of that process. So..how do we gauge whether or not a person is sufficiently spiritually formed for ministry? This is notoriously difficult, however we must attempt to assess this, realizing the subjectivity involved. In my judgment, the person should be characterized by the following:

1) **an authentic humility.** Once again Bondi helps us: “Humility *accepts* our human vulnerability and the fact that we sin. It is not so overwhelmed by human weakness that it is left paralyzed, thinking over its own inadequacy.”<sup>11</sup> Humility allows us to be honest in our estimate of ourselves and remember that our worth is not tied up in being better than our brother or sister.

Instruments of assessment can be quite useful in assisting persons to claim their

gifts and distinctive approach to life. They also can warn against the myth of omnicompetence. Because pastoral work calls one to be a generalist, there is often the expectation that clergy can do it all.

2) **an abiding awareness of grace.** This will allow persons to be “stewards of their wounds”--a phrase I learned from my teacher, Wayne Oates. Grace is deeply related to humor; we do not take ourselves so seriously when we realize it all does not depend upon us. In fact, we may even learn to laugh at some of our own pompousness. Grace also bequeaths a great dignity to our lives because it is the assurance that not only are we beloved of God, but our wounds do not make us less lovable; on the contrary, they draw forth God’s great compassion.

One who is spiritually formed will always express their response to grace as dependence. Such acknowledges that there are not self-made men or women. Bill Leonard writes of the importance of this sense of dependence “in light of the trend toward increased professionalism in ministry. While professional competence is quite necessary for the modern minister, it may imply or even foster a tendency toward self-reliance and ministerial arrogance which is not compatible with the gospel life.”<sup>12</sup>

3) **an ecclesial faith, rooted in community and tradition.** One who is spiritually formed lives with attentive concern for the demands of community.

That one realizes that he or she stands in a heritage larger than their personal horizon; that she or he is indebted to forebears in faith stamps one as an ecclesial Christian.

4) **a maturing moral vision.** Some of the bitterest ecclesial wars are over issues of

social justice. Morality not only has to do with personal boundaries and perceptive ethics, i.e., how one functions as a minister, it also has to do with navigating a responsible approach between the Scylla of intolerant denunciation of perspectives that conflict with one's own and the Charbydis of chameleon identification with everyone so as not to be provocative.

A maturing moral vision requires a great deal of patience in examining conflicting evidence and listening to personal witness. Yes, the Spirit will guide into all truth--but not necessarily on our time schedule. A maturing moral vision allows one to live with ambiguity and the humility to recognize that one cannot be an expert on all of the questions of life. The capacity to find common ground with those whose vision differs from our own is crucial to growth in faith and love. Faculty members, pastoral counselors, psychologists must model this forthrightly.

### Conclusion

Spiritual formation does not occur simply in the three or four years of seminary but perspectives and practices should attend to this essential preparation for ministry. Just as Protestants claim that the church is ever being reformed, so should the minister claim his or her life's work to be ever being formed. May God assist us in this important vocation.

<sup>1</sup>“Seminaries and the ecology of faith: An Interview with Daniel Aleshire,” *Christian Century*, February 3-10, 1999, 111.

<sup>2</sup>Margaret R. Miles, *Practicing Christianity: Critical Perspectives for an Embodied Spirituality* (New York: Crossroad, 1990), 54.

<sup>3</sup>“Context for Academic Leadership in Theological Education: A Dim and Hopeful View,” ATS Conference for Chief Academic Officers, March 1999.

<sup>4</sup>Wheeler, address.

<sup>5</sup>Central Baptist Theological Seminary Catalogue 1998-2000, 6.

<sup>6</sup>Jurgen Moltmann, *The Source of Life: The Holy Spirit and the Theology of Life* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 53.

<sup>7</sup>*The Letters of John Wesley*, ed. John Telford (London: Epworth Press, 1921), 2:280.

<sup>8</sup>Diogenes Allen, *Spiritual Theology: The Theology of Yesterday for Spiritual Help Today* (Cambridge: Cowley Publications, 1997), 9.

<sup>9</sup>Jackson, W. Carroll, Barbara G. Wheeler, Daniel O. Aleshire, Penny Long Marler, *Being There: Culture and Formation in Two Theological Schools* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 5.

<sup>10</sup>Roberta C. Bondi, *To Pray and to Love* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 81.

<sup>11</sup>Roberta C. Bondi, *To Love as God Loves* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1987), 45.

<sup>12</sup>Bill J. Leonard, “The Spiritual Development of the Minister,” *Formation for Christian Ministry*. Ed. Anne Davis and Wade Rowatt, Jr. (Louisville: Review and Expositor, 1988), 82.

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