

Sustaining Ministry Education

*Cultivating the Ecotone of
Lifelong Learning*

EDITED BY DARRYL W. STEPHENS

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Foreword

DEBORAH H.C. GIN AND JO ANN DEASY

The first day of seminary, Debbie was in awe. The systematic theology professor explained his approach from day one by saying he always gets to the “so now what?” question. As someone who had left another field to follow a “call to ministry,” she could not remember any of her medical school professors getting to questions of meaning or existence in her courses. So, to hear it as foundational in this course, she was hooked.

Later, she learned more clearly that this question of meaning focused not only on philosophical perspectives but also practical applications and solutions for the Church. The “so now what?” usually included “so how shall we then live?”

Many of Debbie’s classmates were already in ministry, having studied in other undergraduate fields such as literature, history, and psychology years earlier. While she was thrilled to be studying theology, she struggled through some of the courses because she had been trained from a young age to think scientifically or empirically. She eventually learned to think theologically and reason through inherited tradition, sacred texts, and theological method, but she always

felt like a fledgling just testing her theological and ministerial wings, even after graduation.

Then, after three years, it was over. She had been serving as youth pastor in a small church while in seminary, so the transition to the religious workforce was not sudden. But the church was not strongly connected to its denomination, and her formational community was suddenly gone. She did not know who to turn to with the tougher questions that were beginning to emerge—existential but mostly practical. What should she say about death to the high schoolers who just lost their dad from a heart attack? How should she interact best with the parents of the youth she ministered to—what should her role be in their family unit? How could she better attend to the immigrant and generational divides that dominated the tensions in her congregation? How could she stay innovative in an environment where the senior pastor was frozen in his own seminary-trained understanding of what ministry was supposed to look like?

While she found additional frames of understanding through further study and an advanced degree years later, what had been awakened in seminary now had nowhere to go. There was so much more to learn, but that was it. Master of Divinity done. Community of peers gone. She was now supposedly an expert, ready to lead her own flock. Alone.

Jo Ann faced a somewhat parallel journey to seminary, having come originally from the field of engineering. However, in her case, the scientific lens fit well into a seminary experience that emphasized learning Greek and Hebrew, diagramming sentences, and researching the history of translations to find the exact meanings of texts. Her seminary curriculum focused on pastoral leaders as first and foremost teachers and scholars.

Having already served two years in youth ministry, she found that her courses deepened her love of scripture and church history. However, seminary provided few resources to understand the issues she faced as a youth minister. In two short years as an intern, she had ministered to victims of incest, teens struggling with suicide and self-harm, teens contemplating gang affiliation and wrestling with drug addiction, and more. Seminary provided foundational knowledge but little opportunity to integrate and apply. That would have to wait until after completing her degree.

Luckily, she was part of a denomination with a vibrant clergy network and a strong commitment to lifelong learning. She did not feel alone. She was surrounded by peers and mentors as well as

denominational expectations for lifelong learning. These networks of support, the annual pastors' conferences, and opportunities for ongoing training were a lifeline in her early years of ministry.

Jo Ann faced additional challenges when she was in seminary. Her father suffered a massive stroke at the end of her first semester. His life hung in the balance for several months. There were end-of-life decisions to be made and then, when he recovered, long-term care challenges. There were questions of theodicy, salvation, heaven and hell. She felt little support as she navigated these challenges. Professors and students entered into these conversations as academic debates rather than opportunities for pastoral care. It would be years before she could integrate what she had learned in seminary into a pastoral theology. She pursued lifelong learning through her denomination, additional seminary courses, and an advanced degree to answer the questions that remained as she graduated from her Master of Divinity degree.

We imagine different elements of our stories resonate for those who choose vocational paths of ministry. We expect that, for some, the last day of seminary, while a time to celebrate accomplishment and successful journeying through a rite of passage, also comes with a sense of unmooring and profound loss. And a wish to continue.

Enter lifelong learning. From our perches directing programs at The Association of Theological Schools (ATS), we have observed a few things about lifelong learning, and we believe the future of theological education will not be successful without it. The partnership may emerge in different ways, but the importance of the connection is unquestioned.

At its core, lifelong learning has the potential to carry learning into a perpetual future, and this is a good thing. It shifts the emphasis off the credential and back on to the learning. There is much that ministers need to learn and experience and learn again, but a focus on the degree can have the effect of stunting further learning, especially in busy ministry contexts. Some educational models such as Competency-Based Theological Education have started to shift focus away from courses and toward learning, and lifelong learning is an effective context to further refine that refocus. Areas of competency that would have been helpful to us new in ministry include addressing social issues, caring for our own formation/growth/well-being while we care for that of our parishioners, conflict resolution, and leadership and administration. We have seen other topics surface in ATS research on the religious workforce—budgeting and financial management,

navigating modern ethical issues (e.g., social ethics, racial justice, sexuality), and digital ministry, to name a few.

Sometimes we do not know the right questions to ask while we are in seminary. This is especially true for those who come to seminary with little ministry experience. For several years, ATS coordinated Lilly Endowment's Economic Challenges Facing Future Ministers Initiative. The grant was designed to both help lower educational debt for students and equip students for the financial challenges of ministry. Schools offered courses in personal finance, theologies of money, and church administration, among others. However, these courses were often under-enrolled. Students with a limited understanding of the challenges they would face in ministry did not see them as important. And since they were often relegated to extra-curricular space within the curriculum, they were not seen as something valued by the institution (Deasy 2017).

A theological degree simply cannot provide all that is needed to serve faithfully in ministry for a lifetime. Frankly, there are too many questions in ministry to be answered by three or four years in seminary. Lifelong learning provides structures to help ministers and those who form them reframe "vocation" as something that is part of one's entire life, not just during the very short time period of the degree, especially for those who, for various reasons, are hesitant or unable to pursue a degree. In ATS' Educational Models and Practices initiative (2016–2017), we found that schools had already been innovating with forms of stackable credentials and continuing education (ATS 2017). More recently, we are seeing a growth in non-degree programs—one of the most common themes mentioned in Pathways for Tomorrow proposals in 2021. Of the more than 120 projects launched through this initiative, almost one-third focused on programs of lifelong learning for ministry. Schools are strengthening and expanding their vision for lifelong learning by developing pathways into seminary and programs to support alums, pastors, and congregations before, during, and after degrees are complete. So too, credit-bearing non-degree programs had a 44% increase in new enrollments between 2023 and 2024, and initial findings from ATS' Non-Degree Programs Survey to Deans in 2025 suggest that one of the top reasons that schools offer non-degree programs is for lifelong learning (Herr and Gin 2025). Taken together, these findings suggest the culture is shifting towards learning that can take place over longer periods of time—and not only during a three-year degree period.

To be honest, sometimes graduate theological schools are not well equipped to offer courses for lifelong learners. All too often theological schools simply take their standard master's degree courses and replicate or retool them for their lifelong learners. While detached from formalized structures of quality control (such as accreditation standards), done well as a unique ecotone, lifelong learning can experiment with new modes of teaching that are integrative and contextual, focusing on developing wisdom and critical thinking and supporting the pastoral imagination that is so essential for being an effective pastoral leader. Its flexible structure, not bound by credit hours or degree requirements, allows for more creativity and responsiveness than a traditional degree program. However, it also means that lifelong learning often sits on the margins of institutional budgets and missional priorities, making it vulnerable to budget cuts and organizational restructuring. Such vulnerabilities make it difficult to be creative, take risks, and lean into its unique ecotone.

In addition, the uniqueness of the ecotone of lifelong learning is challenged by a growing number of students who choose to pursue their own lifelong learning through master's and doctoral degrees, particularly the Doctor of Ministry degree. In Fall 2025, over one-third of all entering students in ATS schools were over the age of 45. Over 50% of entering students reported that they were already serving in ministerial positions and 18% were already ordained (ATS 2025a). Similar statistics can be seen among graduates. Almost 30% of 2024–2025 graduates were already ordained and over 35% were already working when they graduated (ATS 2025b). Some of these students are already serving as pastors and seek degrees in order to be formally credentialed within their denominations. Others serve within denominations that do not require master's degrees, or they already have a master's degree and pursue the additional degree as part of their own lifelong learning for ministry.

Amidst the growing complexity of ministry and the increasing challenges of leading a congregation, theological schools recognize the importance of lifelong learning, and from our positions as directors at ATS, we have seen the impact on theological schools and the students they serve. ATS-member schools are thinking more intentionally about the broader ecology of theological education including the unique ecotone that makes up lifelong learning. Our research (Gin et al. 2025) suggests that schools are responding in one of three ways. Some are expanding their programming to include broad programs of lifelong learning by becoming more comprehensive. Others are

expanding their programming but focusing on curation and collaboration around a particular niche over a lifetime. Others are becoming more connective by focusing on integration and formation throughout their programming.

At its best, lifelong learning occupies a space that bridges seminary, church, and society—an ecotone, as promised by this volume’s title, that consists of its own unique conditions and environment but that also has elements of each of those contexts. For Debbie, being on the faculty at an ATS school meant engaging in an annual “assessment day” with colleagues. We reviewed the theses from students’ capstone courses and expected to see good integration between theory and practice; deep learning from their theology, Bible, ethics, and ministry courses; and strong connections between texts and their contexts. We saw only rare examples. When we took time to understand why, we saw that curriculum, teaching and delivery, and, even more fundamentally, the way we approached education did very little to model how students were to connect these environments. Indeed, this disconnection is reminiscent of the struggles Debbie had in seminary to integrate a theology of afterlife with a pastoral theology of compassion and counseling techniques to speak to the youth group students about their father and family. The challenge of integration was even greater for students who were studying in a cross-cultural context where their faculty and the tradition of their seminary were different from their own history and where they would eventually serve.

Leaning deeply into that third space of social context, lifelong learning has the potential to make those integrations apparent to students in a way that is exciting, current, and immediately relevant, particularly when the minister is ready to learn. A survey launched in 2025 by the Association of Leaders in Lifelong Learning for Ministry (see chapter by Blier in this volume) showed growth over five years in three topical areas, theology, spirituality, and training—the exact areas that would have helped Jo Ann during and after seminary as she sought to make sense of family tragedy, especially if those programs intentionally connect the topics for learners. Indeed, in ATS’ Educational Models Mapping Survey, we found that the models that were effective across multiple measures (mission, student learning, and finances) were integrative courses and contextual education (Graham and Gin 2016).

The unique ecotone of lifelong learning has much to offer these new efforts. It is a place to experiment with new adult-centered integrative approaches to teaching and learning outside the formal structures of curricula and credentials. It is a place where we can listen deeply to the

needs and hopes of the Church as we seek to support and form those who lead them. It is a place where we can walk with pastoral leaders as they seek to integrate and apply all that they learned in seminary over a lifetime of ministry. Such a place is worthy of the study and reflection presented in this volume.

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Introduction

Exploring the Ecotone

DARRYL W. STEPHENS

Lifelong learning for ministry permeates the landscape of theological education, often at the boundaries of more recognizable ecosystems. It is a transitional space with its own distinct ecology located at the confluence of church, society, and academy. Learners move between formal degree programs, the practice of ministry in community, and the faith communities that authorize their work. Metaphorically, lifelong learning is an “ecotone,” an area of steep transition between ecosystems, such as an estuary between saltwater and freshwater. Thus, supporters of lifelong learning must be attuned to the needs of churches and their communities as well as the institutional dynamics of the academy.

The Ecotone at the End of Theological Education

Understanding the purpose and potential of lifelong learning for ministry requires a thorough knowledge of the multiple environments that give this ecotone its distinctiveness: church, society, and

academy. In the North American context, we are indebted to Ted A. Smith for his historical tour through these intersecting landscapes, offering a genealogy of the professionalized model of theological education—and its unravelling. His book, *The End of Theological Education*, provides tantalizing evidence of the importance of lifelong learning for ministry.

Smith critiqued the purpose and viability of the inherited model of graduate theological education, calling us to reject its exclusiveness and to embrace more egalitarian forms of ministerial preparation. The “establishment” model trades on respectability and power even though most “Christian ministers . . . are trained in other ways” (Smith 2023, 21). Furthermore, the professionalized model reinforces hierarchies of class and race, despite efforts to diversify educational content and student bodies (Smith 2023, 146–47). Voluntary organizations led by professionals establish clear demarcations between those who give and those who receive, the benefactors and the needy (Smith 2023, 19). Ultimately, argued Smith, “the white settler colonial project that animated the network of voluntary associations in which the theological school took shape as a professional school” must be renounced (Smith 2023, 136). The work of reckoning includes a renunciation of the status, class, legitimacy, and instrumental value the old model afforded those privileged enough to benefit from it.

According to Smith’s analysis, social and cultural dynamics force a reassessment of the inherited model of professionalized theological education even if our moral consciences hesitate. The landscape of professionalized ministry has already been eroded by “processes of neoliberal individualization,” leaving us to “reckon with the ambivalent terrain” so shaped (Smith 2023, 137). We live in “an age of authentic individuals”: beyond the educated professionals and voluntary organizations, we find “authentic individuals” seeking genuine connections with self, others, and God (Smith 2023, 172, 178). In this landscape of authenticity and individualization, new solidarities require a change in aim, from common good to common ground (Smith 2023, 109 and 190). Diverse contexts, needs, and aims meet in projects of material collaboration as individuals seek “an authentic identity in relation to God” (Smith 2023, 179). Theological education must adapt and be responsive to emerging needs in an environment eroded by individualization and scarred with treks of authenticity.

How can we sustain the leaders and pilgrims traversing this landscape? Smith asserted that theological education must adopt new pedagogies and new offerings for the changing landscape of ministry

(Smith 2023, 179–88). Bivocational, lay, volunteer, and other forms of ministry that do not fit neatly within the dominant professional model require renewed attention (Smith 2023, 186–87; Stephens 2022, 329–31). Yet, these “other modes of ministry” identified by Smith are in fact the majority (2023, 21 and 186). They are the common forms of ministry through the ages that do not share the prestige and professionalization that Smith would have us renounce.

The ecotone of lifelong learning supports these majority and common “other” forms of ministry, extending far beyond degree-granting institutions. Most ministers are trained in and find opportunities for continuing education through judicatories, parachurch organizations, congregation-centered conferences and workshops, as well as free-standing organizations providing educational leadership. The professionalized model and its institutions of higher learning restrict our view of the wide and varied ecotone of lifelong learning for ministry, which can be more closely observed from a less privileged perspective. In *The History of Theological Education*, Justo González offered such a viewpoint, calling for “a total reorientation and redefinition of theological studies and ministerial training” (2015, 127). Focusing on the church as a community of learning and the practice of ministry as a primary source of theological learning, González called for (re)turning “theological education into a life-long process” (2015, 128), one not confined to institutions of higher education. González centered theological education in the church—an expansive vantage point from which to view lifelong learning for ministry.

Lifelong learning is the fastest growing (Meinzer 2024) and least-resourced aspect of theological education in North America. Recognizing lifelong learning as one of five primary sectors providing care for clergy, researchers at Duke University observed that “there is very little dialogue occurring between the academic community and other providers,” creating an untapped opportunity for collaboration and support (Austin and Comeau 2022, 60). The Duke study determined that lifelong learning programs need “research-informed tangible guidelines and practical frameworks” to flourish (Austin and Comeau 2022, 72). The present collaboration of program directors, theological librarians, and reflective practitioners contributes to this body of research at the forefront of educational innovation.

Description of the Book

Sustaining Ministry Education: Cultivating the Ecotone of Lifelong Learning presents leading-edge research and best practices to support lifelong learning for ministry. This collaboration of the Association of Leaders in Lifelong Learning for Ministry (ALLLM) was supported by Atla Open Press and a grant from the E. Rhodes and Leona B. Carpenter Foundation.

The contributors to this volume include theological librarians and directors of programs—leaders in the church and academy. Our process of collaboration mirrored our commitment to lifelong learning. This process included multiple online consultations among contributors, allowing us to present our chapter ideas and receive feedback from each other during the ideation stage. We became a community of learning for and with each other. Each chapter is the original, previously unpublished work of the respective contributor.

This book is intended as a resource for theological librarians, directors of lifelong learning programs, deans and administrators, judicatory leaders, and others whose professional roles support lifelong learning for ministry—whether in ATS-member schools, church judicatories, or independent programs and organizations.

The book is organized into four sections, though there is significant overlap from section to section. **Part One: Discovery** provides a survey of the landscape of lifelong learning. Our trek begins with, “Andragogy as Empowerment for Ministry in a World of Artificial Intelligence,” by Darryl W. Stephens. This chapter explores the motivations and intentions behind adult learning, or andragogy, in a world increasingly shaped by artificial intelligence (AI). Differentiating between pragmatic, technical, and formational learning needs, the author asserts that the primary educational issues raised by AI are not technological challenges but rather the human struggle to be a self-motivated adult learner discerning and living into a vocation in this world. In Chapter 2, “Mapping the Ecotone: A Landscape Survey of Lifelong Learning Programs in Theological Schools,” Helen Blier presents empirical survey and interview data on lifelong learning programs in ATS-member schools, providing the first such landscape review of the field since the 1980s. She examines program content, design, and finances; program leaders; and institutional support for these programs. Blier then assesses the future sustainability of lifelong learning programs in theological schools. In Chapter 3, “Information-Seeking Behaviors of

Faith Leaders: Opportunities for Lifelong Learning,” James Bell seeks to understand the information behaviors of practicing faith leaders through surveys and interviews conducted by a team of researchers in Indiana. As a theological librarian, he stresses the importance of information literacy skills for religious leaders, who are often seen as authorities within their communities on research, evaluation, synthesis, and dissemination of information. Bell’s collected evidence of current practices informs future information literacy training for active and aspiring faith leaders. In Chapter 4, “Portraits of Lifelong Learners,” Jennifer Sanborn provides a richly textured exploration of lifelong learning for ministry through the perspectives of learners. She interviewed eight lifelong learners, curating their responses into de-identified portraits to depict how and why diverse, global ministry leaders access, integrate, and commit to ongoing learning. The portraits are organized to accompany the four parts of this book.

Part Two: Innovation explores the leading edge of practice and experimentation, that which is new in lifelong learning for ministry. In Chapter 5, “The Strength of Multiplicity: Developing Cultural Awareness Through the Hispanic Community,” Jessica Lugo-Meléndez encourages institutions to shift from superficial inclusion toward systemic transformation and long-term vitality. She argues that effectively serving Hispanic/Latino lifelong learners calls for intentional cultural awareness rooted in hospitality, justice, and the theological affirmation of the *imago Dei*. Lugo-Meléndez offers several strategic approaches along with practical tools to promote academic success, engagement, and a sense of belonging. In Chapter 6, “Evaluating the Efficacy of the Webinar Modality for Lifelong Learning in Ministry,” Glenn Melville examines the benefits and limitations of the webinar modality, based on a survey of participants in the Carey Centre for Lifelong Learning webinar program in 2025. He concludes with recommendations for how program directors can best utilise webinars as part of a lifelong learning in ministry curriculum. In Chapter 7, “The Center for Asian American Christianity and the Future of Theological Education,” David C. Chao and Joshua E. Livingston respond to the concrete needs and questions emerging from the lived faith of Asian diasporic Christian communities. Drawing on the scholarship of Ted Smith and David Chao, they show that inherited institutional frameworks often fail to address the social, cultural, and spiritual realities these communities navigate. In response, the authors present an adaptive, community-rooted, and globally attuned vision of theological education suited to a post-denominational age.

Part Three: Nurture focuses on nourishment and flourishing: how lifelong learning not only survives but also thrives. In Chapter 8, “Forming Lifelong Learner-Practitioners: Theological Literacy Across the Ecology,” Jodi L. Porter argues that the future of theological education depends on reimagining theological literacy as the cultivation of lifelong, adaptive capability with the pastoral cycle. She proposes heutagogy, or self-determined learning, as a way of forming learner-practitioners who can critically reflect and respond creatively amid rapidly shifting ministry landscapes. Recommended tools for individualized and context-responsive learning include learning portfolios, Indigenous Appreciative Inquiry, and generative AI. In Chapter 9, “The Leadership Institute for Growth, Healing, and Transformation as an Ecotone Case Study,” Katharine E. Lassiter identifies how ecotone thinking assisted her in building a program from the ground up, honoring the values of authenticity and formation. She highlights designing from a non-creedal standpoint, utilizing a practical theological lens, and responding to the hunger for spiritual meaning and belonging. In Chapter 10, “Storytelling: The Twilight Between the One and the Many,” Doris García-Rivera reflects on a Zapatista tale of the twilight of creation and community wisdom to illustrate how storytelling is an embodied process promoting reflection, integration of knowledge, and leadership development. She argues for storytelling as an effective tool for academic and lifelong learning administrators to communicate the importance of lifelong learning programs to stakeholders and decision-making constituencies.

Part Four: Sustainability examines the institutional structures that support lifelong learning. In Chapter 11, “Reimagining Information Literacy for Parish Clergy and Lifelong Learners,” Kris Veldheer reframes the concepts of information literacy and information fluency to promote a vocation-shaped capacity for curiosity, humility, collaboration, and contextual judgment. Examining individual, peer-based, and contextual avenues for lifelong learning, Veldheer argues that clergy who develop information fluency can better guide communities shaped by wisdom, reflective learning, and faithful engagement in a complex information environment. In Chapter 12, “Global Citizenship Education as a Framework for Lifelong Learning,” Lindsay Andreolli-Comstock presents Global Citizenship Education as a transformative andragogical framework for lifelong learning for ministry. The framework is built on three pillars—cognitive knowledge, socio-emotional development, and behavioral change—each of which fosters core competencies like critical thinking and empathy. She argues that GCED

should become the comprehensive framework for lifelong learning in theological education, utilizing intentional pedagogies such as creating brave space and the decolonization of theological education. In the concluding chapter, “From Accidental Academic to Living and Leading Lifelong Learning,” Lisa Kimball employs autoethnography to reveal how embodied experience and contextual awareness can generate insight into systemic change, leadership, and spiritual formation. She argues that sustaining lifelong learning in ministry requires more than structural agility; it depends on humility, creativity, reflexivity, and relational interdependence across institutional and spiritual ecotones. When leaders embrace theological interdisciplinarity, sacred listening, and imaginative praxis, they can co-create spaces where faith, learning, and human flourishing are dynamically renewed.

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Abbreviations

ACRL	Association of College and Research Libraries
ADC	Acadia Divinity College
AI	Artificial intelligence
ALLLM	Association of Leaders in Lifelong Learning for Ministry
ATS	Association of Theological Schools
BIPOC	Black, Indigenous, and People of Color
CAAC	Center for Asian American Christianity
CEU	Continuing Education Unit
GCED	Global Citizenship Education
IAI	Indigenous Appreciative Inquiry
LGBTQIA+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer or Questioning, Intersex, Asexual, and more
LIGHT	Leadership Institute for Growth, Healing, and Transformation
SACEM	Society for the Advancement of Continuing Education for Ministry
UK	United Kingdom
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
US	United States (adjectival form)
VTS	Virginia Theological Seminary

Discovery

Andragogy as Empowerment for Ministry in a World of Artificial Intelligence

DARRYL W. STEPHENS

***P**auline is a part-time lay pastor. After high school, she took a job in human resources, which she has held for twenty years. During the past few years, she became more involved in leadership in her church. She served on the church council, visited homebound members, and preached occasionally. Her only training for church leadership consists of apprenticing with her senior pastor and attending a few weekend workshops for lay ministers. Three months ago, the senior pastor was appointed to another congregation, and Pauline was asked to fill in. Trying to balance the immediacy of pastoral care with planning and leading worship, she has little time for sermon preparation—a task for which she feels woefully unequipped. Turning to a popular natural language text generator, she discovers that this AI tool writes sermons “good enough” for her to preach—though she is reluctant to tell anyone about her use of AI.*

Powerful tools based on artificial intelligence (AI) challenge the premises and motivations for human adult learning. In this vignette, Pauline has no formal training in homiletics, is faced with

time constraints, and has sought out and found a temporary solution to her problem. What will motivate her to learn and grow as a preacher?

Drawing on the wisdom of andragogy, this chapter explores the motivation and intention behind adult learning. The widespread use of AI forces a reexamination of the fundamentals of education. I write from the perspective of a director of lifelong learning for ministry, responsible for programs in both the church and the academy. I begin with an overview of the value of lifelong learning and a growing awareness of its importance in theological education. Then, the concept of andragogy allows us to distinguish between pragmatic, technical, and formational learning needs. Throughout, I operate on the assumption that the primary educational issues raised by AI are not technological challenges but rather the human struggle to be a self-motivated adult learner discerning and living into a vocation in this world. What factors distinguish human adult learning in a world increasingly shaped by AI, and how can adult learning models clarify the task and activity of education? Ongoing formation in the task of preaching serves as an example of lifelong learning for ministry.

Valuing Lifelong Learning for Ministry

Ministry is a peculiar profession. Many ministers enjoy the social status of an educated professional—alongside doctors, lawyers, teachers, nurses, and others—but are not held to consistent continuing education standards like other professionals.

Since the mid-nineteenth century, White-majority institutions of higher education in the United States have embraced a professionalized model for theological education. This model is designed to provide professional formation and education prior to the practice of ministry (Smith 2023, 44–56), in the form of “preservice education” (Cervero 2010, 44). Thus, the landmark study *Educating Clergy* (Foster et al. 2006) omitted consideration of non-degree ministerial education, and it did not address the need for continued learning after seminary. Likewise, only brief mentions of lifelong learning are found in the encyclopedic *Handbook of Theological Education in World Christianity* (Werner et al. 2010). The outsized influence of the professionalized model occludes other widespread forms of ministerial training (Smith 2023, 21). Yet, degree program education cannot provide the integration necessary for pastoral formation across a career.

Integration requires practicing in the profession. In his “Introduction” to *Educating Clergy*, William M. Sullivan noted that the ability to integrate knowledge with practice “provides the great challenge” for professional schools, including seminaries (Foster et al. 2006, 5). The most effective curricula for integration provide opportunities for professionals to exercise problem solving in actual practice and to reflect critically on those experiences. Effective integration requires that one not only learn but also put into practice what one learns, reflecting and refining practice on an ongoing basis. These steps of integration characterize a model of theological reflection as “problem-centred and practice-driven,” mediating our experiences of God and the world in which we live (Graham 2022, §2.6). Thus, the practice of ministry is not merely an application of preconceived theories; it is a means by which we generate theological knowledge (Smith 2023, 164). Some measure of integration can be accomplished through various forms of contextual education within a degree program (Brelsford and Rogers 2008). Yet, no minister’s education is complete upon graduating from a degree program.

Growing Awareness of the Need for Lifelong Learning

Lifelong learning is a widespread practice among Christian ministers around the world, even if ministry practitioners in North America are slower to acknowledge this need. Graduates of the more than 270 member schools of the Association of Theological Schools (ATS) in the United States and Canada are requesting such opportunities, recognizing its role in providing structured opportunities to hone ongoing, effective ministerial practice amid rapid social change.

Lifelong learning is crucial to the future of ministry and theological education (Blier 2023; Blier and Gin 2022; Conde-Frazier 2021, 92–97; Gin et al. 2025, 176; González 2015, 138–39; Smith 2023, 179). Practices such as preaching require continued learning: “The call to preach is . . . the call to a lifelong journey of ongoing personal and professional development” (Tucker 2017, 201; see also Stephens et al. 2025). Data from ATS’s “Mapping the Workforce of ATS Grads” survey show lifelong learning as a significant area of growth in theological education (Gin 2024; Gin et al. 2025, 176). In fact, demand for lifelong learning within ATS-member schools is increasing. Non-degree (certificate and lifelong learning) enrollment in ATS-member schools between

2023 and 2024 was the only significant area of growth and “the most promising enrollment trend” within theological education at that time (Meinzer 2024).

As theological educators seek to respond to rapid changes in the context of education for ministry, ATS-member schools are exploring and strengthening new and existing models of lifelong learning. This trend is evident among the 105 theological schools that received 2022 Lilly Endowment Pathways to Ministry initiative large program grants. Approximately half of these schools include non-degree and non-credit learning as part of their project portfolios. New program administrators, theological librarians, and other key partners are eager for professional resources as they provide and support lifelong learning opportunities for ministry.

Bridging awareness and implementation is a challenge. For the first time, in June 2020, the Association of Theological Schools adopted an accrediting standard pertaining to lifelong learning: “The school demonstrates an understanding of learning and formation as lifetime pursuits by helping students develop motivations, skills, and practices for lifelong learning” (ATS 2020, §3.5). However, there is no consensus on—and very little discussion of—what this means for ATS-member schools. The most effective structures for lifelong learning, such as peer group cohorts, coaching, and guidance by trained facilitators, are not emphasized in many degree programs. How do ATS-member schools understand “learning and formation as lifetime pursuits”? What are the specific “motivations, skills, and practices for lifelong learning” that students should develop?

These questions will not be answered by imposing accreditation standards on non-credit programs. To view lifelong learning as a watered-down version of a degree program—the non-credit version of a Master of Divinity—is to miss the distinctiveness and fullness of what lifelong learning for ministry can be. As Ted A. Smith claimed, “The best versions of this formation will not happen in cut-down professional degrees” (Smith 2023, 187). A misplaced focus on “credentialism” devalues the learning process (Smith 2023, 116). We must, as Smith argued, value practical wisdom, not for its instrumental value but for its intrinsic value (Smith 2023, 164). Thus, it is a mistake to view lifelong learning primarily as an opportunity to generate revenue to sustain dwindling degree programs.

Instead of replicating degree program structures, the qualities of effective lifelong learning programs should be valued on their own terms. However, the typical pedagogical structure of professional

degree programs, with their focus on mastery and expertise, is not conducive to lifelong habits of learning. Bruce Roberts claimed that “seminary education has produced dependent learners” who “have limited experience in learning how to learn,” for example, by setting their own learning goals, carrying out their own learning activities, and evaluating what they have learned (Roberts 2010a, 156). More fundamentally, this dependence is a structural not just a formational problem: “the professional school *produces* ignorance” by serving as the arbiter of what counts as meaningful knowledge (Smith 2023, 145). In contrast, lifelong learning seeks to empower and equip the practitioner to contribute to the creation of knowledge.

Andragogy and the Purpose of Lifelong Learning

Lifelong learning for ministry can be a life-sustaining ecotone transcending the limitations of traditional pedagogy. Situated where church, society, and education mingle, lifelong learning’s means and ends are distinct from those of a degree program. Where graduate theological education often focuses on pre-service formation, practitioners wrestling with complex problems and needing to refine their professional practice require a more dialogical method than information acquisition (Roberts 2010b, 83). Developing the “motivations, skills, and practices for lifelong learning” requires an educational model suited to this task: andragogy.

Andragogy is based on six assumptions: 1) just-in-time learning, based on need; 2) self-directed participants who are agents of their own learning; 3) participants’ life experiences as a resource for learning; 4) a readiness to apply learning to real-life situations; 5) practical application to tasks and problems; and 6) internal motivation (St. Clair 2024, 7–8). Andragogy is a participatory endeavor between learner, instructor, and the communities that support and depend on them.

Andragogy differs from pedagogy in the degree to which participants plan, design, and evaluate their own learning (Knowles 1970, 54). Adults learn best when their practical concerns shape and direct their learning, when they are supported and challenged in a community of learners guided by a skilled facilitator, and when they are involved in assessing the outcomes and determining what to learn next (Roberts 2010b, 86). Andragogy provides a structure for the learner-practitioner to set the agenda and determine their own goals.¹

Pauline, the preacher we met at the beginning of this chapter, exhibits several elements of andragogy. She is resourceful, creative, and pragmatic as a learner. She is clearly motivated to solve her problem of weekly sermon writing. Preaching is a basic expectation of her role as lay pastor, although she has no formal training for this task. To meet this need, she has learned to use the tools available to her, which she engaged at her own initiative, exemplifying self-directed learning. Her experience in the corporate workplace, an environment in which AI is used whenever it simplifies a task, served as a resource for her learning. Her readiness to apply an AI tool (such as Chat-GPT) to a real-life situation is not in doubt, nor is its practical application to her problem. Has Pauline succeeded as an adult learner, or has she merely sidestepped the task of learning?

Adult learning is a spectrum of activities addressing a range of purposes, including pragmatic problem-solving, technical skills, and vocational formation. Pauline approached sermon writing as a pragmatic problem and found a ready solution in AI. I must note that there are many equally creative low-tech solutions to the same problem, such as inviting a guest preacher, borrowing a manuscript from another preacher, or revising the liturgy to include music or other ritual activities instead of a sermon. However, if she is not content with these workarounds, she may be motivated to learn skills for sermon writing. AI might be of use here, too—but what if she is struggling to discern and live into the vocation of a lay pastor?

Pragmatic, Technical, and Formational Learning

To support adult learners like Pauline in discerning how AI might best assist her in professional formation as a preacher, it is helpful to consider andragogy in relation to three modes of learning: pragmatic, technical, and formational. Each of these modes of learning requires different approaches, levels of engagement, and instructional support.

Pragmatic problem solving generally engages nonformal means of learning, requiring no program, program director, or curriculum. Pauline's case study illustrates her use of pragmatic learning. Utilitarian in nature, the success of pragmatic learning is assessed by its outcome: was the learner able to accomplish the task?

Technical learning focuses on fixed bodies of knowledge, acquisition of skills, and repetition and practice toward recognized levels

of competency based on established information. The EDGE method of instruction (Explain, Demonstrate, Guide, and Enable) utilized in Scouting BSA exemplifies this approach. A trusted instructor explains information, demonstrates skills, guides practice, and enables competence. This method requires an experienced practitioner as an instructor and emphasizes hands-on, interactive learning. The success of technical learning is assessed by competency: Is the learner able to employ the skill without assistance from the instructor? Technical learning thus lends itself to assessment via standard measures of competency.

If sermon writing is approached as a technical skill with objective competencies, a sermon written by either Pauline or AI can be assessed and critiqued accordingly. Does the sermon meet accepted standards of competency? Homiletics professors Leah D. Schade (2023) and Lisa Cressman (2023) both provided examples of an AI-generated sermon, showing how the process of assessment requires us to clarify our standards of rhetoric and theology. Effectively, assessing an AI-generated sermon puts us in the role of teacher, and as anyone who has ever taught knows, we learn a lot more when teaching than we do in the role of a student. Thus, from a standpoint of andragogy, the use of AI to write a sermon may demand more from us rather than less, if we bother to assess its output. Sermon writing is not merely a technical exercise, and learning as vocational formation requires a different approach.

Effective proclamation of the Gospel can be considered an art, with subjective measures of competency and success. The use of AI for learning becomes more complicated if Pauline is seeking not only information but also formation (*paideia*), not only technique (*techne*) but also practical wisdom (*phronesis*). Formational learning addresses deeper issues, such as character, identity, and vocation, recognizing the learner as a source of wisdom and knowledge. Teaching for formation differs from teaching for technique (See Table 1). Formational teaching emphasizes creativity to promote construction of knowledge among learners, discovery to promote exploration of skills and applications, peer support to promote integration of knowledge and skills through praxis, and mentoring to promote personal and professional transformation.

The task of foreign language acquisition illustrates differences between pragmatic, technical, and formational learning. For example, as an English speaker traveling in France, I do not necessarily need to understand French. Pragmatic learning can solve many hurdles of translation. Relying on hand gestures and the kindness of strangers

can take me a long way. I also have ready access to many AI applications to translate menus and street signs and even to provide real-time interpretation through my smartphone. However, such tools have their limits, and for more complicated tasks, I may need to develop some basic competency in the French language.

Table 1
Technical Versus Formational Teaching and Learning

TECHNICAL LEARNING	TEACHING EMPHASES (EDGE METHOD)	FORMATIONAL LEARNING	TEACHING EMPHASES
Information	Explain	Construction	Creativity
Skills	Demonstrate	Exploration	Discovery
Practice (rote)	Guide	Integration (praxis)	Peer Support
Competence	Enable	Transformation	Mentoring

Technical learning can be facilitated by apps such as Babbel, Rosetta Stone, Duolingo, and others. These apps teach through rote memorization and practice, rewarding and motivating the user through gamification to persevere when the learning becomes difficult or boring. However, technical learning also has its limitations. Despite drills based on conversations and practical scenarios, these AI teaching apps are one step removed from the pragmatic, real-time assistance I might receive from translation apps. Furthermore, the AI-first approach of Duolingo, for example, does not prepare me for sophisticated interactions involving real humans, requiring linguistic and cultural fluency.

Formational learning goes well beyond technical proficiency, allowing me to understand the language within its cultural context. As a learner seeking linguistic fluency, I must be encouraged and enabled to construct meaning, explore and discover novel utterances, integrate my skills through immersion and practice (mistakes and all), and think and dream in French. In short, to really learn another language is to be transformed into a multilingual person.

The questions of whether and how preachers should utilize AI in sermon preparation are increasingly debated (see, for example, Cressman 2023; Schade 2023; Stetzer 2025). It is beyond the scope of this chapter to engage in ethical arguments about abstaining from or boycotting AI. However, there are good reasons for preachers to

experiment with AI tools even if they do not employ them for their own sermon writing. To paraphrase Cressman and Taylor's (2023) comments about the use of AI in education: AI is here to stay; we should understand its strengths and weaknesses; we should know its capabilities and limits; and we should learn to use it effectively. Whether we like it or not, "Effective and ethical use of AI may become another cornerstone of digital literacy—a skill as valuable as discerning the credibility of online sources" (Cressman 2023; see also chapters by Bell and Veldheer in this volume). What better way for preachers to become literate in AI than to try out these tools for their own use? Indeed, a quick online search by this author revealed half a dozen websites and apps tailored for the use of AI for preachers. As Todd Korpi phrased it, we need "pastoral wisdom for artificial intelligence" (2025).

If Pauline chooses to utilize AI for learning and not just as a handy shortcut, she will find an array of uses. AI tools can help with the following:

- Ideation: choosing a theme or passage of scripture.
- Research: finding and exploring commentaries and other resources.
- Writing: creating an outline or draft of the sermon.
- Critical development: tailoring the sermon to reach a specific audience, such as seekers, youth, older adults, immigrants, survivors of sexual abuse, and others.
- Editing and revision: tightening and improving the sermon for clarity, engagement, concision, story-telling, and other features.
- Adaptation: creating multiple versions for different contexts and occasions, such as services geared specifically for traditional, contemporary, youth, children, camp, or other settings.
- Collateral material: generating ancillary materials based on the sermons, such as a summary and outline for listeners, a blog post, a newsletter article, curriculum, and so on.

When done thoughtfully, each of these uses of AI can enhance Pauline's understanding of the art of sermon preparation, contributing to her ongoing development as a preacher. Furthermore, she should pay attention to the ethics of AI, including questions of transparency, disclosure, bias, impact, cost, and so on. Thus, one problematic feature in the opening vignette is her failure to disclose her use of AI. If she is sufficiently motivated, AI can become not just a workaround but rather a means of transformative learning.

Motivating the Adult Learner

(Trans)formational learning requires significant levels of motivation and support—affective aspects of learning. Emotions play a huge role in learning. Margery B. Ginsberg and Raymond J. Wlodkowski observed, “When adults feel respected, care about what they are learning, and know they are becoming more effective at what they value, intrinsic motivation surfaces like a cork rising through water” (2024, 93). Thus, they proposed four motivational conditions for adult learning: establishing inclusion, developing a positive attitude, enhancing meaning (in relation to the learner), and engendering competence (Ginsberg and Wlodkowski 2024, 95). Instructional strategies conducive to these conditions include a community of support, peer learning, mentoring, collaborative projects, and “caring and accepting social relationships” (Ginsberg and Wlodkowski 2024, 96). Formational, or transformative, learning is challenging, “may not always be enjoyable,” and can lead “to a deep shift in perspective” (Ginsberg and Wlodkowski 2024, 96). For example, when learning French through cultural immersion, I may experience culture shock, fatigue, and stress. Positive relationships, welcoming community, and personal narratives are motivating factors to overcome these challenges (Ginsberg and Wlodkowski 2024, 96). Returning to our case study: if Pauline decides to enroll in a seminary or other course of study for pastoral formation to improve her preaching, she will encounter similar formational challenges and require similar motivational support.

How can the challenges of formation and motivation be addressed? In 2024, I collaborated with two researchers to examine the lifelong learning needs of Methodist preachers (Stephens et al. 2025). Surveying 165 preachers in Pennsylvania and New Jersey, we inquired about their ongoing educational development and spiritual growth, with the aim of discovering motivations and perceived barriers to adult learning. We learned that preachers are eager to hone their skills but often lack time and financial support. Online programs lower these barriers to learning by providing lower-cost opportunities that can be done without the need to commute to a remote site. However, online workshops and meetings may also exacerbate the sense of isolation that many preachers experience. Preachers seeking formational learning benefit from collegial interaction and peer learning—features that are not impossible through online venues. However, formational learning requires intentional support. Congregations, judicatories,

colleagues, and seminaries are all part of the support preachers need in the ongoing formation.

Support plus motivation is the key to andragogical success. Preachers who take responsibility for their learning goals and who seek resources for their learning needs will be more successful in growing as ministry professionals. D. Bruce Roberts described an effective peer group learning experience for preachers that operated 1985–1996 (Roberts 2010b, 86–89). The support that preachers experienced from the program and each other strengthened their motivation to learn and stick with it for several years or more. Facilitators assisted each preacher in deciding on learning goals, developing a learning plan, applying their learning, and evaluating their progress on a continued basis. Roberts reported that “there is little doubt that the peer group process improved preaching in general as well as helped create new energy in pastoral leadership” (2010b, 88). This program illustrates the motivational effect of peer learning and facilitator support for andragogy.

A program of Vanderbilt Divinity School, 2013–2023, was motivated by the fact “that preachers seldom experience ongoing mentoring or coaching after their seminary years” (McClure and Utley 2023, x, 1). The program trained preachers based on a collaborative peer-learning model, supports that are difficult to replicate through AI and that require a significant investment of time and energy. “There are few situations where preachers can reflect on their lives and practices as preachers with one another in groups that are well-coached with an eye toward vocational formation, renewal, change, and accountability” (McClure and Utley 2023, 1). Thus, adult learning that is relational, peer-oriented, and facilitator-led can provide formational learning opportunities unmatched by AI.

The Wisdom of Andragogy in an AI World

What constitutes and motivates human adult learning in an AI world? Adult learners engage in multiple modes of learning: pragmatic, technical, and formation. In the opening vignette, Pauline utilized AI to accomplish a task. A deadline provided sufficient motivation for this pragmatic mode of learning. If she were to explore AI to assist in her technical learning, she would need to figure out how to use AI to explain, demonstrate, and guide her practice of sermon writing

toward greater competency. For example, some preachers use AI to offer suggestions for improving their sermon manuscript before it takes its final form. Prompts might include, “How can this sermon be improved to reach a youth audience?” or “How can this sermon be made more accessible to people with little formal education?” These tasks would require a more sophisticated use of AI, more effort from her, and correspondingly greater motivation. Learning can be its own motivation, at times, but Pauline may also find motivation in feedback from her listeners, an accountability group among her peers, and structured learning opportunities offered by her judicatory. Deeper learning requires more support.

Formational learning is motivated by the emotional and social support necessary for transformation. How Pauline might use AI to enhance the human struggle for meaning and vocation is a question she could explore collaboratively, constructively, and with the expectation that she be changed in the process.

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Notes

- 1 Andragogy is not the only learning model suitable for ministry practitioners. For example, heutagogy provides another powerful approach to adult learning (see chapter by Porter in this volume).

Mapping the Ecotone

A Landscape Survey of Lifelong Learning Programs in Theological Schools

HELEN BLIER

For nearly 75 years, the necessity of lifelong learning for effective ministry practice has been affirmed by theological schools, denominations, and practitioners. As the pace of social and ecclesial change has accelerated, awareness of the critical need for ongoing continuing education to support the work of ministry has grown. However, there has been scant attention by researchers into lifelong learning programs and their leadership.

In winter of 2025, the Association of Leaders in Lifelong Learning for Ministry (ALLLM) conducted a landscape survey of lifelong learning programs in theological schools.¹ Inquiring into the leaders of these efforts, the programs themselves, and institutional support for them, the study provided a longitudinal comparison to ALLLM's 2020–2021 survey, which was the first of its kind in over forty years.²

The two ALLLM studies managed to capture bookends on a period of deep and rapid change in theological education and the work of pastoring. The events of the five years between the two studies read like a checklist for the apocalypse: a global pandemic, momentous elections and deep political division, racial unrest, economic see-sawing, the

so-called “Great Resignation” as masses quit their jobs, the growth of online community, and decline in seminary attendance and congregational life. Tens of millions of dollars supported research into the well-being of clergy, which appeared in many narratives to be in crisis (Austin and Comeau 2022; Campbell-Reed 2022; Coe and Inanoglu 2024; Hartford Institute for Religion Research 2023a). As these phenomena converged and reports proliferated, it was easy to conclude that the times were unprecedented and the news largely terrible.

Yet as the 2020–2021 ALLLM research revealed, the upheaval proved to be a boon to lifelong learning programs. Leaders pivoted, able to respond nimbly to the sudden need for new skills and new ways to gather communities, and all but four programs reported growth. By the time the 2025 survey was completed, lifelong learning programs had firmly established themselves as a singularly reliable growth industry in theological education. While degree program enrollment in seminaries had been on a continuous downward trend for two decades, enrollment in non-degree programs grew 24.2% between 2023 and 2024 (Meinzer 2024). It appeared that lifelong learning programs were rising to the challenge and having a moment.

Looking Back

A wider historical view shows that 2020–2025 has not been the only epoch of major social and ecclesial change. Lifelong learning—or “continuing education,” as it was typically called—came into its own in the 1960s, a time of similarly dramatic and rapid change. The rise of continuing education followed a movement to professionalize education for all practices-based jobs, not just ministry (Cervero 2000). This captured the attention of the American Association of Theological Schools (now ATS) and the National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA. Connolly Gamble, director of continuing education at Union Theological Seminary of Virginia, was charged with the task of investigating “the state of Continuing Theological Education Programs for Ministers,” surveying the needs of Protestant ministers and the continuing education available to them—the first such landscape study of lifelong learning for ministry. The results were published in 1960 as *The Continuing Theological Education of the American Minister* (Gamble 1960).

Gamble was the first champion of lifelong learning for ministry, and his sweeping overview defined the field of continuing education for ministry, defended its necessity, and reported on the state of the industry. If professional education is intended to prepare people for the effective practice of their job, then continuously updating skills and knowledge would be necessary to guarantee that efficacy. This logic was accepted as true in medicine, teaching, and other practices-based professions; why not ministry as well? Seminary would never be able to provide comprehensive preparation: “The incessant change in the world and in individuals requires a program of study and theological reflection if the minister is to remain vital,” he urged (Gamble 1960, 12). The industry concurred: he found a “surprising amount” of continuing education offered in 95 seminaries, plus an additional 60 other venues, including other universities, conference centers, and pastoral institutes.³

The rapid proliferation of programs warranted the coordinating efforts of a guild and conversation about best practices. Gamble’s landmark study led to the establishment of the Society for the Advancement of Continuing Education for Ministry (SACEM) in 1969, ALLLM’s antecedent guild; he was named its first president (Reber 2000). Writing at this same time, researcher Alden Kelly noted the rise of theological consortia collaborating to provide continuing education and cited them as the “wave of the future” (Kelley 1969, 8). Echoing Gamble, he cited the need for more practical training for clergy than was offered in traditional MDiv curricula to support the interpretation of faith in contemporary times. Effective clergy, both argued, were self-motivated and self-reflective learners (Gamble 1960; Kelley 1969).

More than three decades before SACEM, the shortcomings of professional clergy training had already been reported and the need for ongoing education prefigured. The 1934 study *The Education of American Ministers* revealed that ministers felt ill-prepared for some of the basic work of ministry (May et al. 1934). May and colleagues concluded that this was due to seminary education overemphasizing traditional theological subjects at the expense of people skills, like pastoral care and administration (May et al. 1934). This is the point at which the historically-minded lifelong learning leader observes that it was ever thus.

A tension in the purposes of lifelong learning / continuing education is present in its origin story. On the one hand, affirming the need to update skills and information for effective practice in ministry is a necessary consequence of a professional education. This observation

tracks with the approach to content-based continuing education, as had been developed in other professions. On the other hand, as Gamble and Kelley pointed out, effective ministers need to *be* lifelong learners—a formational posture rather than technical enhancement: “A theological education which does not lead young men and women to embark on a continuous, ever-incomplete but ever-sustained effort to study and to understand the meaning of their work and of the situation in which they labor is neither theological nor education” (Gamble 1960, 5). Is the primary purpose of lifelong learning for ministry to form participants in their identity and practice as ministers, or to add to the content and skills required of the job? And what is its relationship to the education received in preparation for ministry?

By the early 2000s, the professional approach to ministry education dominating the twentieth century had begun to crack. As seminaries and denominations wrestled with declining enrollments and questions about the relevance of the education they provided, lifelong learning programs felt the impact. Robert Reber noted that “Continuing theological education is still at a real disadvantage in the church’s educational ecology” (Reber 2000, 41). Despite affirming its necessity, neither denominations nor seminaries prioritized its support, and directors of continuing education were “probably the most marginalized group within the institution [of theological higher education] . . . Continuing education for clergy and laity is the least subsidized educational enterprise in all of seminary education and church education in general.” (Reber 2000, 41). This lack of support nearly caused SACEM to shutter multiple times; membership dropped as seminary programs were discontinued and leadership let go.

In the wake of these tensions, researchers simultaneously sounded the alarm concerning the baseline well-being of clergy. In their benchmark study, Austin and Comeau (2022) named lifelong learning as one of the five pillars of support available to clergy, even as they lamented the decline of pastors’ emotional, vocational, physical, and financial health. Like the clergy they intended to serve, leaders in lifelong learning appeared to be subject to larger forces and unable to anchor amidst rapid social, ecclesial, and educational shifts. And as pandemic-era research revealed, the situation appeared to worsen.

The conversation about a post-professional approach to clergy education began to gain traction with the publication of the Theological Education Between the Times series by Eerdmans (see, for example, Aleshire 2021b). The time was ripe to revisit new ways of supporting ministers in their preparation and practice, and lifelong learning

programs found themselves once again growing amidst a time of social and ecclesial unrest. The ALLLM studies revealed a snapshot of an industry at a moment of deep transition and tipping point.

Capturing the Present Moment

In 2019, ALLLM leadership committed to conducting the long-awaited research project. At the time, the research team had no idea what would unfold the following year. The first inquiry was launched within the first months of the pandemic; the second was launched five tumultuous years later to see its impact on the industry. The decision was made to focus on the leaders and their programs rather than to conduct a needs assessment of clergy, due to ALLLM's commitment to support the leadership of the programs rather than clergy themselves.

The primary research tool consisted of an online survey distributed to all leaders of lifelong learning in ATS member schools. In 2020, a scan of 273 ATS member websites showed 84 programs. Surveys were emailed to program leaders between November 2020 and May 2021, and 41 usable responses were received. The same survey with minor edits was distributed again between November 2024 and March 2025. At this time, 138 programs in 289 schools were identified, and 57 usable responses were received. Additionally, interviews were conducted with 15% of the respondents during the summer of 2025. Surveys collected both qualitative and quantitative data about the backgrounds and perceptions of the leaders; the content and structure of their programs; and levels of institutional support. Interviewees self-selected for participation by emailing their interest to the researchers. What follows is a discussion of the 2025 findings, with reference to the earlier study when warranted.

Overview

One of the most striking data points between the 2020–2021 and 2024–2025 surveys was the growth in the number of lifelong learning programs in theological schools. In roughly four years, the number increased 60%. ATS tracking of non-degree enrollees in theological schools has mapped the effect of this rapid growth, too, naming it “the most promising enrollment trend” in theological education (Meinzer 2024).⁴

Beyond the dramatic shift in numbers, however, there was little significant difference between the data generated by the two surveys. Both surveys show evidence of committed program leaders, robust programs, and an awareness of their crucial contribution to the work of theological education; they also reveal staff spread thinly, problematic economic models, and concerns about institutional support and affirmation of this work.

Program Leadership

Data revealed a cohort of highly qualified and committed program leaders. In 2025, nearly 70% of the respondents held a doctoral degree, 51% of those a PhD or ThD, a credential that would qualify them for any senior level administrative or faculty position. All signs pointed to these professionals choosing to work in this field rather than in more traditional academic jobs. One interviewee left a tenured position to build a lifelong learning program: “I [wanted to] do a little bit more building and thinking about equipping ministers” rather than support a traditional curriculum. Another articulated a vocation found in supporting others’ vocations. While motivations differed slightly, interviewees expressed appreciation for the comparable creativity and freedom they felt in this work as compared to other institutional positions, and they felt they were using their full educational and experiential bandwidth. Among survey respondents, 91% affirmed vocational fit, and 96% expressed satisfaction with their work. Additionally, a third of the respondents had been leading their program for six or more years, a benchmark for seniority in the field, and 42% had been in their positions for three or fewer years, supporting the hunch that grant funding had contributed to the sudden rapid growth in the number of programs.

Program Content

What subject areas do these programs address? The content areas taught remained consistent among the two surveys: 85% provided instruction in theology, spirituality, and leadership; biblical interpretation and pastoral counseling were counted among nearly 75% of the programs. When asked which areas comprised the majority of their offerings, respondents named theology most frequently. Even though

practical theological topics like pastoral counseling and spirituality were offered, they comprised a smaller portion of the overall lifelong learning portfolio. The only outlier was leadership studies, named among the top three most frequently offered topics in both surveys.

Broadly speaking, the content of lifelong learning programs largely mirrors that of seminary degree program curricula, with the prominence of leadership studies as the exception. With 86% of the program leaders reporting the use of seminary faculty for instructional leadership, and with all respondents reporting that their programs are housed within the office of academic affairs, this is not surprising. For the most part, seminary-based programs appear to offer “more of the same,” packaged in short courses, lectures, online classes, and stackable modules that privilege the expert content already available within the institution.

Looking back on the origin of lifelong learning for ministry, however, one sees a disconnect. One rationale behind continuing professional education was to respond to pastors’ emerging needs in the field and “fill the gaps” in seminary education—as early as 1934, the mismatch between curricula and professional duties had been identified (May et al. 1934). In their review of what the religious workforce needs and what theological schools offer, Gin et al. (2025) provided a contemporary underscore to what has been observed by researchers for nearly a century: that there is misalignment between what graduate theological curricula provide and what graduates need for effective ministry practice. Observing the close alignment between course offerings and faculty interests rather than alumni needs, Gin and colleagues wrote, “It is likely that what schools offer is more closely determined by the structure of faculty than what the workforce currently needs” (Gin et al. 2025, 169).

This supposition raises crucial questions for the relevance and institutional location of lifelong learning programs in seminaries. As with the degree program curricula, to what degree are lifelong learning offerings driven by the actual needs of the constituents served? What is the program’s actual relationship to the primary degree-granting work of the seminary? And how does the seminary administration perceive the function of lifelong learning within the institution and in its relation to the mission of the school? Additional potential for misalignment exists between program offerings and the innovative leanings and creative energy of the program directors as well as the espoused mission to support ministry practitioners. A look at the data on institutional support raises further questions.

Institutional Support

Survey respondents were asked about staffing, program output, and economic models to provide quantitative data about levels of institutional support. They were also asked to describe perceptions of that support and what they needed to thrive professionally. Overall, it is not an overstatement to say that lifelong learning programs are highly productive and provide a level of service that far exceeds the staff and resources they have.

Take, for example, the ratio of staff to constituents served. The median staff consists of the equivalent of two full-time employees, and 75% of the respondents reported having significant additional responsibilities, including directorship of other programs, administrative duties, or teaching. In other words, most offices have multiple part-time staff. Yet nearly 40% of the programs reported serving more than 500 participants per year.

A look at the economic models supporting these programs is similarly telling. More than 60% of the programs were expected to generate revenue to cover salary and benefits for staff, 91% of the programs rely on participant fees, and 67% on grant money. Indeed, some interviewees reported having to generate income to compensate for steep declines in degree programs. By contrast, the median number of full-time faculty at theological schools is 11, serving a median student headcount of 139, or 79 full-time equivalent (Chris Meinzer, personal communication, 20 October 2025).

Of course, lifelong learning participants and degree-seeking students do not require equivalent levels of support from a theological school. Nonetheless, these numbers provide a helpful metric. They point to schools perceiving these efforts as a support for the degree programs and institutional solvency rather than contributing to the educational mission in their own right. Requiring lifelong learning to be self-sustaining and subject to drastically different staffing and economic expectations than the other educational programs of the institution underscores this double standard. As one survey respondent commented, “Is there a pill to open the eyes of the administration to the importance of lifelong learning?” Unsurprisingly, when asked what they need to thrive in their positions, directors universally reported staff, time, financial resources, and—crucially—institutional buy-in. When asked what would need to change at their institution if lifelong learning were to be more centered, interviewees struggled. Eventually many admitted that such a move would require a seismic

culture shift, along with a radical realigning of seminary resources, staff, and priorities.

Looking Ahead: Lifelong Learning for What?

We end, in many ways, where we began. Lifelong learning in theological schools is growing rapidly, with the number of programs on a sharp upward trend. Efforts are led by committed and creative professionals hosting educational events that reach far beyond degree programs. They report deep vocational satisfaction in their work, and most identify it as a crucial part of the future of theological education. Is this the turning point for lifelong learning? Will it finally anchor and come into its own, recognized as a necessary component of ministry sustainability and supported in kind? Or will it continue to vacillate as it has for its 70-year history, subject to larger social, ecclesial, and institutional trends? Contemporary conversations about the limits of mainstream approaches to graduate theological education have generated a new moment; accreditation has recognized the importance of lifelong learning (ATS 2020, §3.5), and a turn towards a “formational” rather than professional approach to ministry education has entered the discourse (Aleshire 2021a). All of this suggests that this time could be different.

However, a more established future for lifelong learning is not guaranteed, as these data show. Directors continue to experience a lack of material support for their work and the prevailing culture in their host institutions is slow to change. Staff are spread thinly. The dominant model for programming continues to be informed by seminary curricula and available resources, rather than constituent needs. Heavy reliance on grant funding and participant fees, rather than weaving this work equitably into the overall educational mission of the school, is potentially unsustainable. Overall, administrators turn to lifelong learning to support the institution’s prevailing practices rather than as a way to discern a new future. Lifelong learning has experienced flush times in the past, most notably in conjunction with large grant-funded initiatives, only to wane when the grants sunset. One would not be faulted to temper the hope that this “bright spot in theological education” (Meinzer, 2024) could simply be yet another bubble in the tumultuous history of lifelong learning, headed to another downturn. What will it take for these times to be different?

As leaders on the edges of their institutions, program directors of lifelong learning have a unique perspective: they have one foot in the school and one foot in the communities served by ministry leaders. This location, on the edge, can be both a vulnerability and a superpower. While edge efforts have challenges influencing centers of institutional power, they are the place where growth takes place. Furthermore, this edge serves as an “ecotone”—a biologically rich area of transition between two established environments. Ecotones are not just confluences; they are filled with resources and species from contributing ecosystems both feed and breed in these regions. Similarly, lifelong learning programs serve and benefit both communities and schools. For participants, they provide opportunities and access to resources that facilitate ongoing reflection and formation as ministers in a rapidly changing context. As Dan Aleshire observed, “The times, however, are changing, and the professional model of theological education will not be as good in the next century as it was in the last one. Theological education, if it is to be as good for the future as past versions were for an earlier day, must change” (Aleshire 2021b, 27). Less restricted by some of the requirements to which formal degree programs must conform, directors can pivot and respond to emergent needs more nimbly than their institutional counterparts.

For schools, lifelong learning programs can provide crucial insight into the needs and contexts of the professionals they intend to prepare for ministry. A school cannot change the prevailing social and educational forces that impact its work, but leadership can still attend to these forces and imagine how to do its work in new and more relevant ways given the circumstances—a commitment lifelong learning leaders already embrace. Schools can choose to use these programs reactively to compensate for challenges and deficits within the model of business as usual, or they can help lead a strategic way forward, informed by the living connection they provide between the school and working ministers.

The present cultural moment calls for new ways of approaching the support of ministers throughout the arcs of their vocations—ways that center their experiences, needs, and ways of learning. To this end, theological schools concerned about their relevance and effectiveness would do well to listen to, even center, the insights and work of their colleagues in the ecotone of lifelong learning.

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Notes

- 1 This research was supported by a grant from the E. Rhodes and Leona B. Carpenter Foundation, “Cultivating the Ecotone of Lifelong Learning for Ministry: Discovery, Innovation, Nurture, and Sustainability,” awarded to Lancaster Theological Seminary, Moravian University, 2024. Principal investigators: Darryl W. Stephens and Helen Blier.
- 2 In his chapter “From Yesterday to Today in Continuing Education,” Mark Rouch argued for the need to conduct a landscape study of the programs that provide this education. The ALLLM study was the first such survey since 1984 (Rouch 2000, 27). A flurry of studies on lifelong learning for ministry appeared in the 1960s and early 1970s; the Society for Continuing Education in Ministry (SACEM) conducted the last such study in 1984 to assess continuing education needs among clergy (Rouch 2000, 27).
- 3 In 1960, the American Association of Theological Schools had 82 accredited and 42 associate member schools, 93 (75%) of which had provisions for continuing education. As Gamble observed, this was a staggering amount of continuing education on offer, and none of the efforts were coordinated (Gamble 1960, 21).
- 4 In 2025, The Lilly Endowment, Inc. announced that another 58 schools received grants of at least \$1 million in the second round of Pathways for Tomorrow Initiative funding; the first such round of funding in 2021–2022 provided grants to 105 institutions. A scan of proposed grant projects shows that the majority of recipients intend to offer non-degree education as a significant part of their project portfolio.

Information-Seeking Behaviors of Faith Leaders

Opportunities for Lifelong Learning

JAMES BELL

In 2024, a group of seminary library directors discussed a need to support the information literacy skills of practicing faith leaders. This discussion started with a question: should the group develop a new model of information literacy training for faith leaders in seminary and their supportive faith communities? As discussion continued, the research group decided to take a step back and first learn about the current information behaviors of faith leaders. We envisioned a research project to better illuminate two issues: What past training or teaching related to information literacy had “stuck,” and what new needs have risen since current leaders completed formal ministerial training?

Because we wanted our findings to relate broadly to leaders who completed their seminary education both recently and long ago, we simplified our primary research question: What are the information literacy needs for practicing leaders of faith communities? We also sought to investigate several detailed aspects of leaders’ current information behaviors: behavioral differences by several demographic factors, by religious group, and by levels of training; change in information

behavior in response to technological advancement; and faith leaders' role and competency in teaching or demonstrating information behaviors to parishioners. The research would investigate behaviors and opinions of current faith leaders to better determine the needs of current and future leaders.

Much of the literature relevant to information behaviors of practicing clergy focuses on the skills taught to and demonstrated by ministry students: Lipton and Nyrose (2011) found that undergraduate religious studies students in faith-based and secular institutions seek out information in similar ways, while Lincoln and Lincoln (2011) showed that seminarians often combine several research steps into one, and lacked sophisticated information searching skills. Kamilos and Birch (2014) demonstrated that targeted librarian-led instruction can meaningfully improve doctoral ministry students' information literacy skills. Theologically-aligned frameworks for that instruction have also emerged, with Badke (2015) arguing that the Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL) Framework (2015) aligns naturally with hermeneutical and interpretive practices central to ministerial formation. As clergy increasingly minister in digital and media-rich environments, scholars have underscored the need for enhanced digital literacy. Oliver et al. (2020) highlight how theological educators are preparing students for new media engagement as a core ministerial competency and created a digital literacies toolkit for theological educators. Gin et al. (2025) reimagine graduate theological education to better prepare clergy for leadership in complex, technologically-mediated, and culturally-diverse contexts.

However, the literature is thin in regard to the information literacy or information-seeking behaviors of active faith leaders. Stephens et al. (2025) described several traditional lifelong learning needs for practicing ministers to improve preaching. Among the skills with greatest clergy interest for self-improvement was “[u]sing resources/commentary representing diverse perspectives to inform my preaching” (Stephens et al. 2025, 5). The need for lifelong learning in information and digital literacy for faith leaders is apparent. In this chapter, I share the results of a study used to begin addressing that need. I begin by introducing the method and process for data collection. The results then follow, with special attention drawn to reported current information behaviors of practicing faith leaders. An interpretation section identifies five noteworthy themes and findings: rootedness in scripture; need for diverse sources; responsibility of leadership; the lack of reference to artificial intelligence; and the lack of reference to

libraries and librarians. Finally, the chapter ends with implications for future research and development of lifelong learning in information literacy for faith leaders.

Description and Methods

The initial research group consisted of five library directors (Karl Stutzman, James Bell, Amy Bryant, Tonya Fawcett, and Roger Peters) from seminaries of different Christian denominations (Szpunar and Bradley 2025, 3). Our goal was to create a cross-denominational approach to information literacy training, not favoring the denomination of one seminary over another. Even so, we were limited to faith leaders educated (at least partially) at seminaries with Protestant Christian traditions: Anabaptist Mennonite, Church of God (Anderson, Ind.), Charis Fellowship, and Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod.

The target demographic for this study consisted of practicing religious leaders, defined broadly as persons “empowered as a recognized representative of a church or other religious organization . . . to provide religious instruction and spiritual guidance to others” (Szpunar and Bradley 2025, 6). As researchers, we hoped to reach leaders who had been in practice for many years as well as those recently entering the profession. We also hoped to reach traditional teaching and preaching ministers as well as those whose primary work extended beyond a pulpit or lectern.

Throughout this chapter, the terms *faith leaders* and *religious leaders* are used interchangeably, often in reference to the broader field of ministry work. The term *respondents* is used exclusively for those who provided data in the study. Likewise, the terms *congregant* and *parishioner* are used in reference to people in a community who would be under the influence of the faith leader as a member or follower of a religious group, church, congregation, or parish. The term *community member* is a broader term, referring to people who live in the relevant geographic area but may not be involved with the religious group or church.

The research project received funding through a grant from the Private Academic Library Network of Indiana (PALNI), a consortium that comprises two dozen college, university and seminary libraries, including those involved in the study. Through the grant, two research consultants, Ruth Szpunar and Eric Bradley, were added to the project

to collect data. These consultants employed two data collection methods in the study. First, they sent a survey to seminary students and graduates. Four institutions, Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary, Anderson University School of Theology, Grace College & Seminary, and Concordia Theological Seminary each provided email contact for 250 random students or former students. This created a pool of 1,000 potential survey respondents. The 24-question electronic survey included thirteen screening and demographic questions, which might suggest trends among different demographic groups. The questionnaire then included nine questions on respondents' information behavior. These questions included how respondents create information, what type of information and how they take it in, how they cite or reference information, and how they evaluate information. Two final questions invited respondents to participate in a follow up interview.

For the second method of data collection, the consultants conducted videoconference interviews with volunteers. Respondents from the initial survey could signal their willingness to participate in a ten-question live interview in which they would orally respond to information-related scenarios, questions related to their methods of information seeking and evaluation, and behaviors with social media and other information technology. The interviews provided qualitative data to complement the survey data. For the full list of survey and interview questions, see Szpunar and Bradley (2025, 6–9).

Results and Discussion

The final sample of faith leaders was 988, less the expired contacts from the original pool of 1,000. The respondents to the survey totaled 69 for a 6.9% response rate. Among those, 16 respondents did not self-identify as current religious leaders and were dismissed from the rest of the survey. The following demographic and behavioral data is therefore derived from the remaining 53 respondents.

Demographics

Ninety percent of respondents indicated their present religion was Protestant, with the remaining indicating Other. Approximately 74% of respondents self-identified as a Born Again Christian and/or an

Evangelical Christian. When asked for specific group affiliation, the highest number, 15 (28%), reported Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. The next three highest were Mennonite (11; 21%), Church of God—Anderson, Ind. (7; 13%), and Independent (6; 11%). The remaining 14 (26%) were divided among eight different groups.

Over 50% of respondents reported serving in religious leadership for twenty or more years, the highest option available. The next largest group (25% of respondents) reported 1–5 years of leadership. Related, 33% of respondents reported their religious training ended twenty or more years prior, and another 33% reported their training concluded 1–5 years prior. The third-largest group (22%) reported 11–20 years since their training concluded. The 65+ age group represented the largest number of respondents, with 43%. The remaining respondents were distributed as follows: 25–34 years (11%), 35–44 years (21%), 45–54 (11%), and 55–64 years (13%). Respondents overwhelmingly reported receiving general education in high school (98%), in a bachelor's degree (94%) and in a master's degree (75%). Only 17% of respondents reported general education in a doctoral degree. In contrast, 85% reported religious training in a master's degree, with fewer receiving religious training at other levels: associate's degree (4%), bachelor's degree (23%), and doctoral degree (17%). Taken as a whole, the respondents represent a fairly educated and mature group, including individuals who experienced years of religious leadership prior to the completion of their religious training.

Respondents were disproportionately male (68%), compared to female (30%), with one respondent preferring not to answer (2%). Three final demographic factors signal a fairly homogenous group of respondents: 89% report the United States as their country of origin, 85% currently reside in the United States, and 89% report their ethnic background as White/Caucasian. For complete demographic details, see Szpunar and Bradley (2025, 13–15).

Information Behaviors

Data collected from both the survey and the interviews provides insight into the information behaviors of faith leaders. In this section, most data collected from the survey is noted with percentages of applicable respondents. Additionally, quotations from interview respondents are included throughout. For full survey results and interview report, see Szpunar and Bradley (2025, 16–35).

Faith leaders create information. Not surprisingly, 74% of respondents noted they create oral information in the form of both sermons and presentations, with the rest noting they create presentations (17%) or sermons (8%). Some respondents (8%) also noted their creation of oral information in the form of workshops, retreats, consulting, and more. Similarly, respondents create written information in the forms of denominational articles (40%), letters (28%), journal articles (17%), blogs, books and chapters, devotionals, curricula, and more.

Faith leaders consume a variety of information sources. Religious leaders mentioned 146 unique sources that they read or listen to regularly, with thirty sources mentioned more than once; additionally, religious leaders mentioned 93 unique sources that they read or listen to occasionally, with nine sources mentioned more than once. Among the specific sources noted, the vast majority are current or recent within the last forty years. Material types include books, podcasts, magazines, news, and journals. One respondent noted, “So for sermons in particular, [my] primary source is going to be the Bible, obviously, as you mentioned, but then my secondary sources will be usually commentaries on that text, [to] kind of get an idea of what’s going on in the text. And then the majority of my sermon writing [process] is actually reading other sermons.” Approximately a third of the sources noted are by specific individuals, highlighting the respondents’ interest in authorship in addition to format. With news sources specifically, respondents noted a need to engage selectively and to include multiple perspectives. They engage with digital platforms and also personal networks and community discussion.

Faith leaders use a variety of methods in information evaluation. Biblical alignment topped the list of reported evaluation tools used to accept or reject information (51%). This finding is unsurprising for a group of Christian leaders predominantly identifying as Evangelical. However, the long list of other methods demonstrates a wide variety of strategies for source evaluation employed by these religious leaders. Other methods include: consultation with peers, friends, and other individuals (20%); critical thinking based on the source, evidence, or logic (12%); discernment and contemplation, including prompting from the Holy Spirit (12%); further research or cross referencing on the topic (14%); source validity, bias, authorship, and authenticity examination (20%); thorough reading (8%); trusted source of information (8%); and worldview or personal missional alignment (12%). Specifically, respondents’ religious worldview is centered in evaluation of news through application of a long-term perspective (consider historical

and spiritual context); a focus on justice and equity for vulnerable populations; and the elevation of a secondary responsibility to be politically engaged.

Faith leaders respond to questions with a variety of strategies. In response to questions of theology or current events, respondents reported a range of strategies to provide a good response: seeking understanding and clarity of the question or issue; reliance on past theological education or personal research; scriptural alignment and Biblical foundation; intuition; contextual consideration; and presenting multiple perspectives. One respondent noted theological questions need to be directed back to scripture: “If it’s grounded in what the Scriptures actually teach, not something hypothetical, but something that I can prove directly from the Word of God.” Another respondent shared a response strategy of demonstrating openness and interest in parishioners’ interpretation and evaluation before leading to their own: “So I try to determine how much openness is there, and is this a safe place, or is someone like learning to attack or finding a reason to attack me personally? So then after that, I kind of lean in . . . saying, ‘Well, let’s talk about it.’ And usually I ask their point of view first, just to find out where the thin ice is and where the mud or the potholes are, and then I say, ‘Well, I have a perspective. May I share mine with you?’”

Faith leaders cite their sources. Nearly unanimously (98%), respondents reported citing religious texts in their work. Similarly, the vast majority (85%) also claimed to cite other sources in their work. They use a variety of methods in citation. Many include verbal citations during sermons or presentations or use graphics or videos. One respondent noted the use of social and electronic media within their presentations: “My communication background taught me [to] consider your audience . . . like, if I’m talking to high schoolers . . . you got to keep and maintain the students’ attention, so maybe I go to TikTok or Instagram reels . . . I might include some clips of that media in my talk.” Some respondents reported comfort in formal written citations when producing written communication, or even in their personal notes. However, some respondents report that, due to their reliance on scripture, they do not include other sources.

Faith leaders continue to develop their information skills. In longer interviews, respondents noted several ways they have gained additional information literacy expertise following their formal seminary education. Some learned to use community, historical, or cross-cultural contexts and verification, while others developed

personal theological frameworks. One respondent shared how they arrived at a scriptural centering:

Well, then I had to kind of figure out some things on my own and patiently and over a journey of a while, I said, okay, all that peripheral stuff is pointless. Maybe it wasn't pointless, but it is now, and then you start over, and then you begin to integrate what is pointed and what is helpful. And part of engaging the scriptures has been that re-engagement and an understanding and appreciation, not of the facts, but the meaning of Scripture and the depth, the many layers of meaning.

Similarly, some respondents develop familiarity with source triangulation or prioritizing primary sources, while others develop awareness of the influence of social media algorithms and individual news institutions.

Additionally, religious leaders use a variety of avenues for growth. They engage with religious texts such as study of the Bible or intentionally broaden their perspectives through reading of diverse sources or engaging in personal reflection or community discussion. They pursue further educational development opportunities and embrace technological advancements. Perhaps as a result of these intentions for growth, and the changing climate of information, respondents also reported changes in their information-seeking behaviors. Some pointed to a shift away from print and toward digital formats, describing an increased ability to multitask while consuming information. One respondent noted the consumption of news media especially supports multitasking: "I can get the *New York Times* headlines and the *Washington Post* . . . in the email . . . when I wake up, that's a change. My father had to . . . get it delivered to his door." This multitasking may be a necessity rather than an option: an increase in available information, both helpful and not, prompts the need for an increased selectivity of news sources, the consultation of more diverse sources, and enhanced fact-checking.

Faith leaders are engaged in social media. This recent communication and information medium has increased immediate access to news and community engagement with information. When asked how social media has changed their information-seeking behavior, one respondent replied: "I might hear about something on social media first, but then corroborate that on the internet, whereas, like ten years ago, it might be you hear about something through a general Google search and then find out more on social media. And now I feel like that

flipped, for better [or] for worse.” Some respondents also reported their increased caution as a response to misinformation delivered through social media. They reported sharing content related to their church or community, their own theological teachings and insights, as well as articles and other positive content. Respondents reported a resistance to sharing personal photos or other self-promotion, controversial opinions, or unverified information.

Faith leaders teach information behaviors to their parishioners. The teaching of good information behaviors happens both directly and indirectly. Respondents reported modeling positive behaviors by providing diverse sources, demonstrating transparency and balanced engagement, and providing access to citations and resources. In one example, a respondent shared how they might promote and provide access to literature from their own collection: “If they see a cool title on a spine, they can just check it out and take it home. So there’s that sort of modeling where I just give them stuff that’s already vetted and kind of build their sense of . . . right and wrong . . . in that way.” Respondents also teach information behaviors directly by using sermons as teaching opportunities, emphasizing critical thinking, teaching source evaluation, and participating in one-on-one mentoring. Further, they reported encouraging parishioners in positive information behaviors through promotion of communal learning and by encouraging primary source consultation and ongoing learning.

Interpretation

Several major themes emerged from the findings on information behaviors of practicing religious leaders. One major theme is their desire to remain grounded in religious texts, particularly scripture. Religious leaders consistently prioritize primary sacred sources as the foundation for teaching, preaching, and decision-making. They turn to scripture not only for theological guidance but also for inspiration and practical solutions, demonstrating a commitment to maintaining authenticity and fidelity to their traditions. Their information-seeking behaviors reflect interpretation, consultation of commentaries, and engagement with historical and cultural contexts to ensure that their messages remain rooted in core beliefs.

Another significant theme is their commitment to including diverse perspectives. At first glance, this second theme could seem contrary to

the first. While scripture remains central, faith leaders actively seek information from a variety of viewpoints to enrich their understanding and connect with the diverse experiences of their congregations. This behavior includes exploring scholarly works, interfaith dialogues, contemporary issues, and traditionally marginalized voices and peoples. By engaging with differing interpretations and global voices, they aim to foster inclusivity, address complex social questions, and remain relevant in a rapidly changing world.

Additionally, faith leaders recognize their leadership responsibility in guiding their communities. Most faith leaders approach information gathering with an acute awareness that their choices influence not only individual spiritual growth but also the values and actions of their parishioners, and thereby the direction of the broader community. This sense of accountability drives them to verify sources, balance tradition with innovation, and communicate clearly and ethically. Their leadership role demands ongoing learning, critical reflection, and the ability to translate complex information into meaningful, accessible teachings. Together, these themes highlight faith leaders as intentional, reflective information users who balance reverence for sacred texts with openness to diverse knowledge and a deep sense of duty to those they serve.

Noteworthy is what is missing among the responses. No faith leaders mentioned use of artificial intelligence (AI) tools or resources in their information gathering, evaluation, or dissemination. This omission is possibly tied to framing or phrasing of interview questions (while open-ended, no questions specifically addressed AI) but is still surprising considering multiple questions on technology, evaluation of information, and modeling behaviors. It is likely that AI will have an increasingly integrated relationship with information in the future and that faith leaders will engage with it regardless of their current level of comfort.

Another surprising finding was the minimal reference to other information experts. Respondents seldom mentioned the availability of the expansive resources and expertise of libraries and librarians when describing their information behaviors. It is possible that some respondents were no longer in geographic proximity to a physical academic or public library they valued, but considering the large number of recent seminary students, a lack of reference to the seminary library resources was surprising. In contrast, some responses indicated a desire or intention by faith leaders to curate their own smaller information collections (for example, to develop a small parish library collection)

for themselves or their congregants. While many faith leaders noted the massive corpus of information now available, some seemed to suggest a solution is to restrict their attention to a small subsection rather than to develop or utilize search and evaluation strategies to get through the multitude.

Implications

A review of the study responses necessitated a shift of focus. We originally expected to discover what religious leaders know about information literacy and how they behave with information needs or utilize their information literacy skills. Instead, we discovered an acknowledged need for support in modeling, or perhaps even teaching, of information literacy concepts and behaviors for their parishioners and in their communities. This need progresses naturally from their recognized responsibility as noted in the themes above. When challenged in their information behaviors, religious leaders noted their comfort areas and also areas of struggle.

This shift of focus is important as educators focused on information literacy consider how and when information literacy skills and concepts can better be taught or reinforced. This is the lifelong learning component. Perhaps information literacy teaching in undergraduate or seminary study is satisfactory, or perhaps it needs bolstering. In either case, faith leaders that emerge without these educational backgrounds will need support in their own skills and in their guidance of others.

Proponents of information literacy education for religious leaders need to examine what should and can be done during traditional education (secondary, undergraduate, and graduate or seminary), what can be supported in continuing education opportunities, and what will be left to the self-motivated lifelong learning of practicing religious leaders. These different avenues for information literacy training and support need to be considered distinct, perhaps non-sequential, knowing that practicing faith leaders emerge from different educational backgrounds and at different stages of post-education career turns.

Data from the interviewees can be a starting place as educators look to support faith leaders in this way. Faith leaders provided a handful of ideas for their own information literacy needs: a toolkit for media interaction; a guide for assessing credible primary sources; workshops or other training on current information environments. They

also provided ideas for faith leaders to convey information literacy development to their community: easily digestible information for faith leaders to pass on to congregants; critical thinking exercises and case studies to use in teaching; digital literacy and news evaluation resources for use in teaching parishioners. Faith leaders also asked that these resources include diverse perspectives and marginalized voices.

Librarians and educators should take these ideas seriously and work to provide tools and resources for lifelong learning in information literacy for faith leaders. Seminary librarians might look to build or fortify networks with faith leaders in their geographic communities and the community of their faith tradition. Providing and promoting library resources, and similar quality resources available on the open web, might reduce faith leaders' desire to shun broadly available information while building a limited parish library collection. The future of religious information literacy learning lies in some combination of training modules for current religious leaders, teach-the-teacher resources to pass information down the funnel to parishioners, and resources built directly for community members to be offered up through the faith community.

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Portraits of Lifelong Learners

JENNIFER L. SANBORN

To complement this exploration of the lifelong learning for ministry ecotone, the author contacted and interviewed eight lifelong learners, curating their responses into portraits that are organized by book section theme. These de-identified portraits, presented with aliases, depict how and why diverse, global ministry leaders access, integrate, and commit to on-going learning. Each portrait conveys a particular story and relies extensively on the learner's own voice and perspective. While these portrayals cannot represent the full array of lifelong learners for ministry, their individual stories prompt valuable questions for all to consider. The author invites all leaders of lifelong learning programs to consider if and how they are listening to their learners and holding their learners' experiences at the center of their program offerings.

Part One: Discovery

Cultivating Curiosity

Eve is a ministry entrepreneur. She designed a 100% digital ministry that provides “safe space for people who are questioning their faith, or are deconstructing or decolonizing their faith.” Leading people in their evolution from certainty to mystery requires that she simultaneously learn from what has been while envisioning what might be. “Even though I’m a very non-traditional person, I still need to understand what the traditional church is talking about. I still need to be able to understand the pulse of what’s happening.”

It is vital that Eve stay current with the rapidly-changing medium with which she ministers. “When I first started . . . no one was talking about tech, because I kept asking those questions. ‘Why is there nothing about technology here?’ And I was amazed and so blessed to see [a course on AI] that I broke my promise that I wasn’t going to take any classes this year!”

She describes luxuriating in a conversation about AI and being created in the image of God.

Just as her content reaches people in the midst of their daily lives via what she now calls “attention media” (rather than “social media”), she believes important learning takes place in the contexts in which we live our lives—and in a world that is rapidly changing. While formal schooling and degree programs are important, “I also think the experiences in which you participate, whether it’s at work, it’s at home, or it’s at school—those are learning experiences as well.” She describes how the phrase “lifelong learning for ministry” is a revelation for her. She celebrates that being a “lifelong learner” is now widely regarded as good, in contrast to the derisive description she grew up with:

To have people who were lifelong learners, [some in my family] felt that you were just learning, but you were never going to apply [that learning]. . . . What joy I have to hear ‘lifelong learner’ outside of being an insult. It is an amazing thing! . . . My daughter is a lifelong learner, and I’m so proud of her for being that way. I wanted to cultivate that in her.

Identity is important to Eve, and she recognizes those who follow her ministry are not empty vessels. To honor the complexity of who

they are as well as their evolving belief systems, she is attuned to intercultural and language learning to skillfully communicate, and she adopts a posture of openness to both the content and the individuals she encounters.

If there was ever an attribute that I would suggest to people to make your life so interesting—to make your life really spectacular—is to be curious. No matter what the topic, no matter where. But to just be curious. It introduces the opportunity to gain knowledge about things you’ve never explored before.

Holy Dissatisfaction

Elena is a certified local pastor who pursued a Master of Divinity at a denominational seminary thirty years after she concluded her formal education. She grew up in Puerto Rico and speaks both Spanish and English; her MDiv was her first degree in English. Her career as a teacher provided some foundation, but it was a challenge to navigate a new educational system in a second language.

She embraces challenges, including participating in a preaching cohort to increase her confidence and authenticity in delivering her messages in English. While she had a course dedicated to preaching in seminary, she was not serving a local church at the time, so the experience lacked immediacy and context. Now, with coaching, she can see the immediate benefit in her service to her congregation.

In terms of writing my sermons, I am very intentional now with using more vivid images. Because in the past it’s not that I was not using them, but because English is my second language, I think that I was not putting the same [images] that I would put in my native language. . . . I write poetry in Spanish. . . . And now I’m very intentional in putting [images], because that definitely adds a lot to a sermon. So, people are able to picture, right?

When Elena speaks of learning, there is a sense of urgency in her voice. She is motivated to pursue lifelong learning by the needs of those around her and denominational loyalty. If her judicatory leaders recommend a learning opportunity, she applies, whether that opportunity is locally or globally focused. She conveys a healthy spirit of holy dissatisfaction in her call to learn and lead.

I was saying to my coach today . . . When he asked me, “How do you feel now? Do you think that you reached your goal in terms of what you were expecting at the beginning?” and I said, “I don’t want to say yes. I don’t want to say a yes, never!” Because I think that if I go to that point, I will stop learning, and I will stop trying to find new ways. . . . We learn every day something else, and everything changes from congregation to congregation, from season to season, from historical moment to historical moment.

Elena recognizes the need to embrace technology and its place in learning, and she can see how the church must offer something different to speak to people today. At the same time, she laments that her sense of community is often diminished in virtual courses. She must intentionally avail herself of the content as well as what her peers can offer: “I think that a lifelong learner also has to be humble to recognize. ‘Okay, I’m not good. Not right now. At this point. I’m not still good about this.’ And this, you know, that’s the only way you decide to learn from others.”

As she continues to pastor, she is discerning what people who come to church are seeking.

There are people with a lot of questions about God and about why this? Why that? So we have to be ready to share answers that are not final answers but are a way to motivate people to learn about God from themselves, by themselves, right? Yes, inspirational and motivational approaches, because I think that’s the way we can attract people to remain being part of our congregation—not because we have all the answers, but because . . . she left me with questions. I think that people need that more and more.

Discussion Questions

- How does your program provide access to both traditional and emerging content and ministry contexts?
- Lifelong learners for ministry include those who have a strong sense of religious or denominational identity and those for whom this identity is not or has never been meaningful. How do you provide outreach and build community to engage both audiences?

Part Two: Innovation

The Privilege of Learning

James is a global leader and learner. He has lived and served on three continents and is fluent in multiple languages. He currently serves in New Zealand within a denomination that requires continuous learning to maintain one's registration as a pastor.

I came back to New Zealand [from France]. We joined the [denomination] church here, and then we were presented with this formal, lifelong learning. So, for me, it was a revelation. I hadn't studied anything formal since Bible college in the early nineties. So, for me, it was a wow! This. I've been looking for this. I've been needing this for years.

With expectation comes opportunity, and the pastors are offered a range of options to choose from, as well as funding for their learning. The continuing education model was "distance learning" prior to COVID-19, and pastors would receive content and respond via email. The learning required of the pastors became more community-oriented and synchronous as leaders in every sector embraced webmeeting technology through the pandemic. Now James intentionally chooses options that emphasize interaction with others and believes that he learns as much or more from his peers as from subject matter experts. In selecting topics, he seeks to integrate self and other-focused learning.

At the end of each year we're given a list of options that we can follow. . . . One of the options I've taken is to give myself time to learn Maori, the New Zealand native language, and just finding time to do that is very difficult within a ministry role. So, to be able to plug that into my learning modules for this year has been really good. So, my approach is . . . trying to get that balance between what I would like to do for me to give [myself] some new understanding, some new learning, and what I could do to have an insight for my ministry.

In childhood, James was labeled someone who would not or could not learn. Teachers regarded him as a troublemaker, and he left school at age 16 with few qualifications or employment prospects. He learns now with the enthusiasm of one long denied. While he attended a Bible college to become credentialed for ministry, his primary learning has been outside of formal, accredited contexts, and he is an enthusiast

for lifelong learning. The community and content fill both a want and a need for him.

James encourages leaders of lifelong learning programs to balance expectation and emotion in communicating their offerings:

[Offer] lifelong learning [so people] see it as being something positive, not something imposed. And I know . . . there will be people who see it as being an imposition, but it's just an awesome opportunity to continue learning. . . . make it obligatory to be continued to be recognized as a [denominational] leader. You must. You must be involved in this. But then some people will just react and say, "Well, I'll just tick the boxes, and I'll just appear on the screen." But that's that. But yeah, just be positive. . . . send out that positive message: This is an awesome opportunity that many people in the world don't have.

Filling Gaps

Rochelle serves at the denominational level, so, in addition to her own lifelong learning, she is responsible for encouraging the pastors she oversees to pursue learning for their continued registration with the denomination. She aims to lead by example, referring to a supervisor in another context who assured her team, "I will never ask you to do anything that I myself have not either done or am prepared to do myself."

For Rochelle, determining how to invest in lifelong learning is a process of reconciling or integrating competing priorities: areas of personal interest vs. content to support her pastors, time-intensive vs. time-efficient, academic learning vs. applied learning, learning in a familiar context vs. stepping outside her comfort zone, and content that is timeless vs. contemporary issues.

I'm always having to balance what I'm interested in and what piques my interest as opposed to what I need to upskill in, because the stuff that piques my interest is stuff I probably already know or I have a background in, whereas the stuff I need to grow in or my pastors need to grow in is the stuff I probably need to lean in. So, it's always a bit of a tension.

What might have previously been either/or options for Rochelle have increasingly become both/and as she matures in her leadership.

Take her response, for instance, to those who would point to their earlier theological training as sufficient for service today:

I mean, my theological degree was 20 something years ago. There's still a lot of application in there, and really foundational principles. . . . But life has changed, life continues to move, and so there's always something new that we can learn. . . . your academic qualifications . . . will never go away, but you can continue to build [on] what your basis was to make sure that you're current for today's ministry or tomorrow's ministry. So, I think that's the difference for me—hence the lifelong learning. There's always something that we can continue to adjust, to contextualize, to make current an application now. I mean, there are papers, you know, even academic papers that exist today that never existed 30 years ago, whether it's in Christian ministry or in other academic degrees.

Rochelle builds her community as she builds her content, valuing the known and pursuing the new. Her prior work serving a missionary society is evident as she seeks to identify existing resources and build connections to fill gaps.

I go straight to the attendees on the right-hand side of my screen . . . “Who’s on today, or who’s on this thing?” . . . we’re a relatively small group. So, if it’s people from within country and within denomination, which is not always [the case], I look at the list, and I . . . often know a lot of those people again because of the network. So, you scroll down and go, “Oh, you’re on that! Oh, you asked that question. Actually, I could go back to you. I’ve got your contacts.” Again, small country. . . . We are better together. And so, when you come together in a cohort, these people are your community for this time but also hopefully beyond this time. There’s a lot I have no idea about, but there are people better and more experienced and more skilled than I am, so what I can do far better is to listen to what is needed, to listen to the requests, to observe the gaps. Whether our pastors and our leaders realize they have gaps, I see them and then put something in place.

Discussion Questions

- Many lifelong learning programs have their roots in academic institutions and structures, and might intentionally or unintentionally model these contexts. What changes can you make

to ensure learners who have been disenfranchised from such structures are able to fulfill their need and desire for lifelong learning?

- Participants in lifelong learning for ministry are often learning for a purpose. How do you equip them to carry their learning forward to those they serve?

Part Three: Nurture

Prioritizing Connections

Alice first discovered lifelong learning for ministry while discerning options for pursuing ordination. A career teacher, she felt called to a ministry vocation, but with a full-time job and three kids at home, it was not feasible (then) to enter a Master of Divinity program. After recently retiring from teaching and accepting a call to pastor a church, she now imagines pursuing additional formal seminary education after she is ordained.

She earned her teaching degrees when online learning did not exist, and, as a learner, she draws on her experience teaching online at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. Her learning style is adaptive, integrating her natural inclinations with the way things are presented.

Most of the things that we get are digital, and I'm old school. So, I print them out. And I'm handwriting my notes and highlighting on paper, right? . . . I'm sure younger people are much more adept at marking up their document and doing all of their stuff online. Me, I need that paper [and] pencil.

For Alice, community is essential—both in her congregation and in her lifelong learning courses. Scaffolding, supporting learning by building upon prior knowledge, also describes how she builds personal connections with other learners.

[O]bviously, I'm a people person, so that drives a lot of what I do. . . . When we have our Zoom classes, I will reference something that I learned about somebody else [in our discussion posts], either within the context of what we're studying or just something about them. But it's making that connection with them face-to-face on Zoom. . . . It makes [the learning] much more meaningful, and I have found that

when I do that, other people do that as well. . . . Even though it's only six times on Zoom, we develop a sense of community by the end, where it's not just a random person who's on the screen. . . . Sometimes the classes carry over where it's the same person in a couple of classes in a row. We share our contact information, as well, to reach out after the class or during the class for other things, and just building those connections that way, I think, also helps.

Called to pastoral leadership from within a church where generations of her family have attended, Alice has a built-in learning community. They regularly inquire about what she is learning.

They're kind of walking this journey, and I love it because it's a lot of our older congregation members who are in their eighties and their nineties, and they feel like they have a role as they're helping me through this journey. . . . I always have something [from class] that's applicable either to what's happening in the church or happening in the world or happening in the community.

As a decades-long teacher, Alice has empathy for the instructors and facilitators of her courses, and she offers them this advice:

It's hard to make connections, especially through Zoom and through remote settings. But it's sometimes hard to make connections within a class[room] setting, too, when you are driven by all that you have to cover. Just remember that those relationships that you have built are sometimes more important than the content that you're sharing. Because when you build those relationships upfront, everybody wants to buy in and learn more because they feel connected.

Making Life More

Bruce is pursuing a vocation in the ministry after a corporate career. Lifelong learning for ministry is an opportunity to explore topics and relationships that were inconceivable in his prior work and study. It is clear as he talks that this season of pastoring and learning is a profound privilege, and he exudes enthusiasm and joy.

Talk about lifelong learning. . . . It was like a renewal, you know. It was a week with a group [of pastors] . . . And the first thing the president of it, he said, "You get to drop your roles here. You're not a pastor. You're not a youth minister, right? You're not a preacher. You are a child of

God,” and, in fact, I think he said, “You are an image bearer,” and just to let go of the burdens and have space.

Bruce’s formal education as an undergraduate began with disruptions. He experienced an injury that halted his athletic career. The faculty in his chosen field suggested he find another path. Despite his success in business, he often harbored the feeling that he had not fulfilled his potential or accomplished his intentions.

While the ministry has pressures, Bruce experiences serving his two-point parish as a relief after years of external demands, and he is looking at himself and his life through a new lens.

I don’t want to be a lifelong learner because I feel like I’m not enough, right? And I think that’s a dangerous path that you could get on, that you are constantly seeking the next thing, because there’s a lack in you right? Like “I’m not enough.” So, I have to keep taking these classes, because [of] . . . the false belief that someday I’ll be enough. “I’ll have enough education that people will respect me,” or “I’ll get the love I’m looking for,” whatever it is. I thankfully can say that I don’t think I’ve fallen into that mindset very often. It has always been out of curiosity, or you know, I just find these things interesting that they can make my life fuller, not from a lack, but just because, you know, it makes [my life] more.

Bruce’s sense of privilege at the prospect of learning about God and his natural curiosity requires that he be discerning in selecting learning paths. He knows he can “follow the shiny object” and become overcommitted, but he has learned from experience how to choose opportunities that meet a current need. While he appreciates the range of options available, he sometimes misses the structure and rigor of seminary that challenged him to be more organized in his time and approach to learning, and he imagines he will one day pursue a doctorate.

As a pastor seeking to inspire his congregation, Bruce empathizes with leaders of lifelong learning who are developing and offering courses and programs.

I think if I was a leader of lifelong learning—actually I am, right, in many ways?—you just want from the bottom of your heart for people to be curious and to gain new skills and resources. You just want that for people, and not everybody wants it, right? Not everybody is interested. It’s just not even on their radar. And I have spent countless tons of

energy trying to [make them interested]. If it's not lifelong learning, it is a love for God. It is a love for life or whatever. You know, you can't really fundamentally change people's interests. But you certainly, if the seed is in there, you can help that bloom. And so, I think right there should be at least an awareness that you cannot create lifelong learners, but you can find the ones who have that in them and help that blossom.

Discussion Questions

- As facilitators of lifelong learning, what intentional strategies do you use both in-person and online to facilitate meaningful connections between participants as well as to the course content?
- Bruce depicts valuing learning experiences where he was offered what some might call pastoral care. What qualities of spiritual leadership are valuable in facilitators of courses and programs?

Part Four: Sustainability

Learner as Teacher

A lifelong learner at heart and in practice, Julia primarily identifies now as a teacher of lifelong learning and leader of an entrepreneurial ministry learning school. She pursues her own learning to better serve her learners and to explore the vastness of the world in which we live.

Julia learned from earlier transitions between undergraduate and graduate schools and through various career paths that context is vital to learning. “I went from an ivory tower experience to an inner-city experience, and that was super helpful for me along the way.” She recognizes that learners choose their path based on circumstances largely out of their control—and too often out of the awareness of lifelong learning teachers.

I think it's important to think about adult learners and their life situations, because how I engaged in continuing education for a good 10-year period had everything to do with not being able to travel to a particular place because of my [responsibilities] as a young parent. And then I started using my continuing education [time] to teach.

For many learners, time and money are defining factors, so they naturally gravitate toward opportunities that meet an immediate need.

When you ask, “What do you look for in continuing education events?” it has been things that directly connect to the work that I’m doing. I mean, I would love to go off, and, you know, learn something completely different. But because my time has been limited, it’s always like, “Oh, I *need* to learn that.” So, I’ve learned about conflict. I’ve learned about systems. I’m a continual student of learning about systems.

While time and money often define *what* learners like Julia pursue, their generational cohort influences *how* they set out to learn.

I am of a particular age. So my go-to is not like my kids. . . . My kids go straight to YouTube, and they inquire of the algorithm, you know, “Show me a video that’s going to teach me how to do X.” . . . I’m still a book reader. I’m also a Googler to figure out about different resources. I’m also a connector—I’m going to call the person that I think has information about whatever I happen to be interested in, and . . . I’m going to ask a series of questions, and we’re going to have a conversation, and I’m going to learn from someone I perceive to be the source.

People and community are a primary source for Julia, as well as the books she fills with personal notes and sticky memos. To encourage pastors to get to know their communities as a primary source, she models honoring her learners as the primary shapers of the classroom experience.

What I try to do as both a learner and as a facilitator is really, really try to think about what it is to be in the shoes of the learners that I’m engaged with. And so, I feel like I’m constantly looking for context clues or stories about where people are, because I think the best education is to meet people where they are. . . . I am an authority in a lot of things. I have a lot of experience I can offer you, but I am not the be all and end all. We first admit that, and [tell learners], “You need to make this information work for you. So, if it’s not working for you in this moment, then let’s find a way to help it.”

Julia admits being open to continual feedback can be scary. Learners may request changes that would take a course off the path of the grant providing funding or result in a teacher being out of favor with a sponsoring institution. Ultimately, for Julia, the risk is worth the

reward of being relevant. “We don’t teach the same thing every time. . . . Because if you keep teaching the same thing, it doesn’t matter anymore. You know, it doesn’t really connect to the current context. And I think context is incredibly important.”

Leaning into Discomfort

Michael is a lay leader in a liturgical tradition. Despite moving frequently for his retail career in publishing, he always prioritized finding a local church in his tradition. In a similar manner, he would often seek out the nearest seminary or theological school for workshops, seminars, and cohorts, situating himself within both a local congregation and the life of the denomination.

This pattern of understanding himself in time and relationship is familiar to Michael. He majored in history at an historically Black college/university, focused on American history as a graduate student, and is now a dedicated family historian and genealogist in retirement.

I have taken every single opportunity, every single place I’ve been, to be in a *something* that’s teaching me something. Every single place . . . everywhere in between, I’ve tried to do that—to just find a thing that was of some interest or might teach me something brand new and just go with it. It [learning] doesn’t turn off for me. I always want to maybe know the story behind the story, or if there’s something that piques my interest sometimes, I’ll just make a note of it. But I’m coming back to it to learn more about it. That’s a regular for me. There isn’t a day that I don’t think that I’m doing that.

He jokes about accruing frequent flier miles on Zoom but also values the opportunity to learn in-person and strategically plans his travels to visit as many significant family history sites as possible. Within church-related learning, Michael was shuffled between three different cohorts in one ministry program due to the disruptions of COVID-19 and instructor preferences around virtual vs. in-person learning. While his progress through the cohort was not smooth, he took advantage of the opportunity to observe multiple groups encountering similar content:

One of the things I got from [the cohorts] is the wide varieties of how adults get information and what they do with it. And I think I had not respected how much people’s backgrounds influence how they receive

information today. How where they came from, what the conversations were at their dinner tables, what their education—their formal education—was, whether they’ve been exposed to . . . close reading of the Old Testament, whether they’ve been exposed to history [influences their learning]. Most people who are not history majors turn it off at some point, and I found that with adults, that when we got to . . . the historic parts of Christianity, there was Christ, and then there’s yesterday afternoon at church, but there’s nothing in between, right? There’s nothing there.

And so that was a whole [lot] for somebody who loves history that was in courses with people who didn’t have an appreciation for Martin Luther, or for Jews being expelled from Spain, or for any of those things. It was remarkable to me to appreciate that. People come to the table, to the learning table with lots of different things going on. So, I think that’s been the biggest learning art for me, and I continue that [learning] even in genealogy—to recognize that in a way. I had a colleague who used to say, “Folks don’t know what they don’t know, right?” . . . But they’re still adults. They’re fully functioning. They’re doing all of these other things, right? And so just kind of appreciating that and taking them where they are.

While Michael has learned to appreciate the different realities for individual learners and can accept that not everyone is as naturally curious as he is about history and identity, he is frustrated with a Church that he regards as lacking in curiosity or willingness to grow.

I’m challenging myself to continue to grow as much as I can, to grow in knowledge, to grow in empathy, to grow in . . . my questions to be more informative. I am disappointed that the church is not growing. I don’t think that the church is growing in those same ways. I don’t think the church is growing to know itself better. I don’t think the church is growing to see itself better. I don’t think the church is growing to have a more relevant role in the world. And so, I think that there are [divergences] clearly for me . . . in what I’m looking for in life, and what I see the church looking for in life.

Michael urges leaders of lifelong learning for ministry to truly listen to those they are serving and develop opportunities that respond to the present needs of the world.

We have a divided society, and we’re not talking with one another. I want lifelong learning leaders to hear that as an invitation to create

programs to do that. . . . As I look at programs that kind of empower people to use resources, I think that those are all good. I think that it's great [to have] formation resources. I think all of those things are good. But I don't think that that necessarily gets to, "How do I talk to this person? How do I talk to the multiracial person who comes to my church on a Sunday and feels uncomfortable? How do I talk to them? How do I? How do I have tools to have those conversations?" . . . I think that that's a learning that I'd love to see in the church in a serious way through lifelong learning. But I also like to see that information . . . I'd like to see that in seminaries. . . . I want to see that everywhere.

Discussion Questions

- How are learners invited to shape the future directions of your lifelong learning program?
- Michael depicts a need to both meet learners where they are and provide experiences that empower them to engage an increasingly diverse world. In what ways does your program address current events, culture, and the changing realities of church and the world?

Innovation

The Strength of Multiplicity

Developing Cultural Awareness Through the Hispanic Community

JESSICA LUGO-MELÉNDEZ

As per the US Census, by 2060, the U.S. Hispanic/Latino population is projected to reach 111 million people, accounting for 27.5% of the national population (Vespa, Medina, and Armstrong 2020, 7). In 2025, the community accounted for nearly one in five residents and was the single largest contributor to U.S. population growth over the previous decade (Piña and Martinez 2025). These numbers reveal not simply demographic change but also a seismic shift in education, society, and the church. Hispanic communities are no longer a “minority” on the margins; they are central to the fabric of the United States’ future.

Despite this growth, many lifelong learning programs in the United States, particularly in accredited theological and faith-based institutions, continue to operate with a one-size-fits-all model. Curriculum, pedagogy, and institutional practices often assume monolingualism or Euro-American norms as the default, unintentionally excluding those whose lived experiences, languages, and worldviews are shaped by cultures other than their own. This approach not only diminishes the learning experience for multicultural participants, particularly in

light of this chapter's focus on Hispanics, but also weakens the institution by missing opportunities to leverage multiplicity as a strength. Cultural awareness is not optional but essential for education in the twenty-first century and beyond.

At its heart, cultural awareness is an act of hospitality. Genuine hospitality does not force the guest to conform to the host but creates free space where individuals may discover themselves, their gifts, and their calling (Nouwen 1975, 51). Applied to lifelong learning, this means creating classrooms, campuses, and programs where Hispanics are not outsiders adapting to imposed Euro-American norms but rather full participants shaping the learning environment with their voices, histories, and spiritual traditions. A culturally aware lifelong learning program is not merely about translation, marketing, or vague celebrations; it is about creating structures, curricula, and communities that affirm the dignity, identity, and belonging of Hispanic learners across generations. Educators, administrators, ministry leaders, and lifelong learners must recognize that serving Hispanic participants requires intentionality, humility, and a commitment to transformation.

This chapter provides a panoramic understanding of Hispanic/Latino realities and three strategies for transforming institutions of lifelong learning into culturally aware environments: 1) Enhancing cultural awareness and institutional commitment as part of the *imago Dei*; 2) Developing inclusive strategies at all levels of programming; and 3) Embedding inclusivity into curriculum, faculty, and staff development. Through these strategic lenses, educators can gain practical tools for fostering academic success, engagement, and a sense of belonging among Hispanic/Latino lifelong learners, enabling institutions to move beyond surface-level inclusion toward systemic transformation.

Understanding Hispanic/Latino Realities

Before implementing shared strategies, lifelong learning directors and administrators must understand Hispanic realities. To serve Hispanic/Latino learners effectively, educators must begin by acknowledging the diversity and complexity of Hispanic identity. Too often, institutions approach this community assuming that shared language or broad cultural markers mean shared experiences. In reality, Hispanic/Latino identity encompasses multiple generations, national origins,

linguistic realities, and cultural traditions, all of which shape the learning experience.

The story of the Hispanic community in the United States is one of steady growth, resilience, and transformation. Between 2015 and 2025, no group contributed more to U.S. population growth than Hispanics, shaping the cultural, social, and educational landscape in profound ways (Krogstad 2020; Piña and Martinez 2025). Once considered a “minority” presence, Hispanics have become a defining force, not only in numbers but also in influence. This trend tells us something important: the future of education in the United States, including lifelong learning for ministry, cannot be imagined apart from the Hispanic community. Institutions that prepare now, by becoming culturally aware, inclusive, and responsive, will not only serve Hispanic participants well but also secure their own relevance and vitality in the decades to come, facilitating swift integration of generational differences.

Each generation brings unique strengths and challenges. First-generation Hispanics often maintain strong linguistic and cultural ties to their country of origin. They may face challenges with English proficiency and educational systems unfamiliar to their families. Thus, first-generation learners may possess resilience and a deep respect for authority, but they often struggle with systemic barriers. In contrast, second-generation Hispanics, who are U.S.-born children of immigrants, typically navigate bicultural realities, being fluent in English while still retaining cultural practices from their parents. Thus, second-generation students often act as cultural bridges, interpreting for parents while navigating American norms. Additionally, third-generation Hispanics may be fully assimilated linguistically while still valuing traditions, faith, and community ties passed down through their family. Thus, third-generation students may wrestle with questions of identity, belonging, and cultural memory. A culturally aware program acknowledges these nuances and resists treating “Hispanics” as a single category.

Hispanic/Latino learners face persistent inequities across higher education: lower levels of degree attainment compared to peers, underrepresentation among faculty, and systemic barriers such as language access, financial precarity, and race-linked gaps in opportunity. These inequities are particularly true in theological education. As Elizabeth Conde-Frazier reminds us, making theological education accessible is not simply a matter of “opening the door” but of “beginning with the wisdom and assets of the community, not with the academy’s

assumptions about what theology should be” (Conde-Frazier 2011, 127). Access, in this sense, is not only structural but also epistemic.

Access means recognizing that Latinas/os are not empty vessels waiting to be filled with theology; they are already carriers, storytellers, and producers of theology. Thus, Justo L. González insisted that the future of Christian thought in the western hemisphere will not come from the traditional centers of power but from marginalized communities themselves: “the future of theology in the United States will be shaped by those on the margins, not because they are marginalized, but because they bear the living faith of the church” (González 1990, 32). Hispanic theological lifelong learning formation is therefore not remedial; it is formative for the future itself. And so, to serve Hispanic lifelong learners and students well is not simply to correct inequity; it is to participate in the emergence of the next theological horizon.

Perhaps the greatest challenge for Hispanic students is not just access but also a sense of belonging. People thrive when they feel seen, valued, and connected. For Hispanics, belonging is built through language inclusion, cultural representation, relational mentoring, and institutional practices that affirm family and community values such as *la bendición* (the practice of giving blessings within families, especially from elders to younger members, expressing care, guidance, and approval) and *el respeto* (a deep-rooted cultural value emphasizing respect for others, particularly elders, authority, and communal norms). Faith plays a central role in many Hispanic households. Church life, spirituality, and biblical authority are interwoven with cultural identity. For programs of lifelong learning for ministry, especially, this reality means that ignoring cultural context results in disconnection. When programs fail to provide a sense of belonging, students feel invisible; when programs succeed, they unlock the gifts of resilience, spirituality, and creativity that Hispanic learners bring to the classroom. Programs that understand and integrate Hispanic theology, cultural traditions, and faith practices not only affirm Hispanic identity but also enrich the whole learning community.

Enhancing Cultural Awareness and Institutional Commitment as Part of Imago Dei

The phrase *cultural awareness* is used in educational circles, but in practice, it is often misunderstood or reduced to surface-level gestures.

Too many institutions equate awareness with cultural celebrations, food fairs, or a Spanish-language flyer. While these activities may express goodwill, they do not address the deeper transformation required for lifelong learning programs to truly engage Hispanic/Latino learners. At its core, cultural awareness is about transformation, a reshaping of institutional identity, values, and practices to reflect the diversity of God's people. It is less about "including others" in a fixed model and more about reimagining the model itself so that all cultures are honored as co-creators of knowledge and formation.

It is essential to distinguish between cultural awareness and cultural competence. Awareness involves recognizing the presence, needs, and contributions of Hispanic/Latino communities. At the same time, competence requires the skills and behaviors necessary to adapt teaching methods, policies, and systems to effectively serve diverse learners. Both are essential: institutions cannot advance toward actual competence without first being aware of and acknowledging the richness and diversity that Hispanic students bring to the learning community.

The opposite is a one-size-fits-all mindset, which assumes a universal learner who conforms to dominant cultural norms, usually white, middle-class, monolingual, and Western. For Hispanic students, this approach creates barriers: curricula that exclude Latino voices and experiences, pedagogies that overlook collaborative and relational learning styles common in Hispanic cultures, and assessment methods that privilege specific ways of knowing while devaluing oral, communal, and experiential learning. This educational monologue leaves learners from Hispanic and other cultures feeling unseen and undervalued. By contrast, culturally aware programs of lifelong learning affirm students' identities, weaving their lived realities into the fabric of the learning process.

For Christian and theological institutions, cultural awareness is more than an educational necessity: it is a theological mandate. Scripture repeatedly emphasizes the inclusion of all peoples into God's redemptive story. The doctrine of the *imago Dei* affirms that every human being bears God's image and deserves dignity (Gen. 1:27). Cultural diversity, then, is not accidental but part of God's design. The New Testament portrays the church as a diverse body where each member contributes uniquely to the whole (1 Cor. 12). Cultural awareness, rooted in biblical teaching, is therefore a form of discipleship and justice. It resists assimilationist pressures and instead embraces diversity as a gift of the Spirit.

Programs of lifelong learning for ministry are called to translate these theological convictions into practical action. The biblical call to hospitality, welcoming the stranger (Lev. 19:34; Heb. 13:2), challenges institutions to create environments of radical welcome, where students from all backgrounds feel valued and seen. The eschatological vision of Revelation, where “every nation, tribe, people, and language” worships together (Rev. 7:9), provides a model for institutions today: unity does not erase difference, but the Spirit weaves diversity into strength.

Practical expressions of biblical inclusion include embedding Scripture that affirms justice and equity into institutional ethos, designing chapel services and spiritual formation that integrate Hispanic worship expressions, encouraging intercultural dialogue across student groups, and rooting diversity work in discipleship rather than mere compliance. Flexibility is also essential. Many Hispanic students balance work, family, and ministry responsibilities. Evening courses, online formats, and modular intensives allow participation without forcing students to choose between education and community. When inclusion stems from these biblical convictions, it transcends trends and becomes part of the institution’s spiritual DNA. Lifelong learning programs that cultivate such awareness embody the gospel’s vision of reconciliation, hospitality, and the full flourishing of all God’s children.

Furthermore, programs that serve Hispanic learners must consider language realities. While many Hispanic students are bilingual or English-dominant, Spanish remains central to identity and family connection. Offering bilingual courses or Spanish-language tracks demonstrates cultural awareness and expands access for first-generation learners. In practice, transformation includes intentional steps such as language inclusion, offering courses, services, and communications in both Spanish and English; relational pedagogy that draws on small group dialogue, storytelling, and mentorship; equity audits to review policies, hiring, and curriculum for bias; and leadership representation that ensures Hispanic voices are part of decision-making roles. These practices go beyond merely accommodating Hispanic students: they reshape the institution itself to reflect the richness and diversity of God’s kingdom.

This work of transformation cannot be pursued in isolation. Partnerships with Hispanic-serving organizations, churches, community groups, and national associations provide wisdom, credibility, and vital connections. For example, lifelong learning programs can collaborate with Hispanic denominational networks to identify potential students, offer contextual training, and support graduates

in ministry. Such partnerships embody *comunidad* (community), a core value of Hispanic culture, reminding us that transformation is never the product of solitary effort but of shared commitment and collective vision.

Developing Inclusive Strategies at All Levels of Programming

If cultural awareness is truly transformational, institutional strategies are the mechanisms that bring it to life. For institutions of lifelong learning to serve Hispanic learners effectively, commitment must go beyond symbolic gestures to include structural change in governance, policy, and resource allocation. Cultural awareness strategies require leadership to reflect the communities they serve, ensuring that decisions are informed by those with direct experience. For example, boards that include Hispanic leaders are more likely to recognize systemic barriers and advocate for meaningful change. At the same time, advisory councils composed of students, alumni, and community partners provide critical insights into how policies affect real lives. Accountability is also essential. Institutions should track progress on Hispanic student recruitment, retention, and graduation, and communicate results transparently. Although they cannot fully capture transformation, metrics focus leadership on concrete outcomes and create a culture in which equity is an institutional priority rather than a peripheral concern.

Change begins at the top, where boards of trustees, presidents, and senior administrators set the tone for cultural awareness and inclusion. Genuine commitment requires embedding inclusiveness into mission statements, strategic plans, budget priorities and lifelong learning goals. Simply declaring diversity as a value is insufficient; institutions must dedicate resources to ensure that inclusivity is operationalized. Practical commitments may take many forms, including establishing a Cultural Awareness office or council with the authority to influence institutional decisions, allocating scholarships to support culturally diverse students, partnering with Hispanic-serving organizations and churches, and conducting regular climate surveys to assess belonging and equity. Policies and resource distribution further reflect institutional values: admissions practices that recognize bilingualism and community leadership, hiring practices that intentionally recruit

Hispanic faculty and staff, and financial aid systems designed with the economic realities of Hispanic families in mind are all concrete expressions of commitment. Resource allocation is both theological and practical, signaling what the institution truly values. Investments in translation services, cultural centers, or mentorship programs are tangible indicators that Hispanic students are recognized, supported, and central to institutional life.

When institutional strategies align with cultural awareness, the impact can be transformative. Institutions like Hispanic Summer Program (as of 2024, Hispanic Scholar Program) supported individual student persistence while also strengthening institutional outcomes; partner institutions reported an increase in Hispanic student retention, affirming the program's value for recruitment, retention, and long-term engagement (Solis-Walker et al. 2023, 19). This example illustrates that when strategies are rooted in cultural awareness, the outcomes are not only ethical but also strengthen the institution's vitality, affirming the value of Hispanic students and creating a more vibrant academic and spiritual community. Equally important is embedding inclusivity into the curriculum, faculty, and staff development.

Embedding Inclusivity into Curriculum

Curriculum, pedagogy, and institutional programs shape identity, belonging, and the sense of purpose within a community. Curriculum is often called the “hidden script” of education, because what is included, or excluded, communicates powerful messages about whose knowledge counts, who belongs, and whose voices are valued. For Hispanic learners, the curriculum is never neutral; it either reinforces marginalization or creates a sense of belonging. For Hispanic learners, a culturally aware lifelong learning curriculum communicates a powerful message: “You belong here. Your culture matters. Your faith is valid. Your leadership is needed.” Without this affirmation, students may earn degrees yet remain disconnected from the institution. With it, they are empowered to thrive, bringing resilience, creativity, and leadership to the classroom and beyond.

A culturally aware curriculum integrates Hispanic voices, histories, and contributions across all disciplines rather than confining them to a single elective or optional course. In history classes, this may include the role of Latinos in shaping U.S. political, cultural, and

religious life. In theology, it means incorporating voices such as Justo L. González, Ada María Isasi-Díaz, and Orlando Costas, just to mention a few. In education programs, bilingual pedagogy and multicultural strategies should be considered core content rather than supplementary material. When students encounter their culture reflected in what they are learning, they experience validation and affirmation, signaling that their identity is central rather than peripheral to both academic and spiritual life.

Effective adult learning in culturally diverse settings requires attention not only to pedagogical theory but also to the lived experiences and cultural values of learners. Hispanic learners bring rich traditions and communal practices that shape how they engage with education. Principles such as *familismo* (family-centeredness), orality through storytelling, and *respeto* influence participation, communication, and the ways knowledge is constructed in the classroom. When these culturally informed practices are considered alongside the principles of andragogy, self-direction, experiential learning, relevance, and problem-centered instruction, they illuminate pathways for creating learning environments that are both respectful of cultural identity and aligned with best practices in adult education. By examining collaborative learning, storytelling, and respect for authority in light of andragogical theory, educators can design culturally responsive instruction that fosters engagement, reflection, and meaningful knowledge construction.

For example, collaborative learning, which emphasizes group projects and peer learning, aligns with the andragogical principle that adults are self-directed and bring valuable prior experience to the learning process. Andragogy encourages participatory learning environments where learners actively construct knowledge together. The communal values of *familismo* and *cooperación* (cooperation) naturally support peer-to-peer engagement, reflecting the andragogical emphasis on social negotiation, shared problem-solving, and experiential integration.

Likewise, the use of *testimonios* (testimonies) and narratives connects learning to lived experience, which is central to adult learning theory. Andragogy posits that adults learn best when content is relevant to their personal and professional contexts and when they can integrate experience into the learning process. Storytelling validates learners' histories and promotes reflection, bridging cultural ways of knowing with the adult learning principle that learning should be problem-centered and connected to real-life applications.

Additionally, the value of *respeto*, where students may hesitate to challenge professors, presents an interesting tension with the andragogical principle that adult learners should participate actively and critically in their learning. To reconcile this tension, pedagogy can invite dialogue and reflective questioning in ways that honor respect while encouraging autonomy. For instance, small-group discussions, case studies, or anonymous contributions allow learners to exercise self-direction without directly confronting authority, thereby aligning culturally informed practices with the adult learning focus on learner engagement, autonomy, and critical thinking.

All three patterns—collaborative learning, storytelling, and respect for authority—can be harmonized with andragogical principles when instructional design is culturally responsive. They leverage adults’ prior experience, promote relevance and reflection, and respect cultural norms while fostering autonomy, problem-solving, and active participation, demonstrating that culturally informed pedagogy and adult learning theory are complementary rather than contradictory.

Embedding Inclusivity into Faculty and Staff Development

No institution can become culturally aware without paying attention to its faculty and staff. They are the daily interpreters of curriculum, policies, and culture. For Hispanic learners, faculty and staff often serve as role models, mentors, and advocates. However, Hispanic faculty remain significantly underrepresented in U.S. higher education (United States Government Accountability Office 2024). The same pattern is found in theological education and Christian institutions.

Importantly, retention and advancement of Hispanic faculty require more than recruitment. Hiring Hispanic professors is only the first step; retaining them demands systemic support. Too often, Hispanic faculty experience the “minority tax,” being asked to sit on every diversity committee, mentor all Hispanic students, represent the institution in Hispanic churches and communities, and speak for Hispanic Heritage Month. While these contributions are meaningful, overtasking faculty leads to burnout and undermines their scholarly trajectory. Institutions must invest in research funding that enables publication in Hispanic studies and theology, recognize community engagement as legitimate scholarship with impact, and open intentional pathways for leadership

into roles such as department chairs, deans, and senior administration. These strategies not only retain talent; they model the inclusive leadership institutions say they want to cultivate in their students.

Representation also matters. The visual presence of Hispanic professors in the classroom communicates possibility: “If they can succeed, so can I.” Intentional recruitment must therefore be expanded beyond traditional hiring networks to include Hispanic professional associations, denominational connections, and pipelines of emerging Latina/o and Latinx scholars. Bilingualism and bicultural expertise must be understood as academic capital, not peripheral skills. And relocation support, as well as family-friendly policies, can make a critical difference in attracting candidates from diverse regions. True representation cannot be tokenistic or relegated to ethnic studies alone; Hispanic faculty belong across disciplines and across decision-making levels.

Finally, faculty and staff who are not Hispanic also shape the experience of Hispanic students. Cultural humility training is essential, not as a one-time workshop or “competency” to master but as a long-term posture of respect, curiosity, and responsiveness. This includes exploring foundational Hispanic cultural values, such as *familismo* and *respeto*; understanding the barriers experienced by many Hispanic students, including language, financial constraints, and family responsibilities; and adapting classroom practices to be more inclusive through collaborative learning, differentiated assessment, and the use of bilingual or culturally relevant resources. Cultural humility invites institutions to expand not simply their programs, but also their imagination, to make space where students can bring their whole selves and succeed on their own terms.

Conclusion

The future of education in the United States cannot be imagined without Hispanic communities. The challenge is clear: lifelong learning programs that cling to outdated models will fail to serve Hispanic learners effectively, leading to disconnection, attrition, and irrelevance. The opportunity, however, is transformative: to build programs where Hispanic students not only have access but also belong, thrive, and lead. Institutions that embrace cultural awareness at all levels, through governance, policy, resource allocation, and curriculum, do

not merely comply with educational norms; they live out the gospel's vision of hospitality, justice, and reconciliation, fostering environments where all members of the community can flourish and contribute to the transformation of church and society.

By embracing cultural awareness, institutions live out their mission to educate, disciple, and empower all of God's people. Inclusive institutional strategies involve embedding equity across governance, policy, and resource allocation to ensure that Hispanic learners are supported both structurally and symbolically. Curriculum and pedagogy should be intentionally designed to reflect Hispanic realities, integrating culturally responsive content and teaching practices that validate students' experiences and heritage. Faculty and staff development is equally critical, as leaders must be equipped to mentor, advocate, and model inclusivity in all aspects of institutional life. Undergirding all is the call to biblical inclusion: to recognize every culture as a reflection of the *imago Dei* and every learner as a vital member of Christ's body.

As lifelong learning educators, we are called to steward not only knowledge but also justice, belonging, and hope. For Hispanic learners, this means creating spaces where language, faith, and culture are celebrated as gifts. For institutions, it means moving from monologue to dialogue, from assimilation to transformation, from one-size-fits-all to *one body, many members*. Engagement and belonging are fostered by creating holistic communities rooted in faith and *familia*, where students feel seen, valued, and connected both academically and spiritually. The future is already here. The question is whether our institutions will rise to meet it.

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Evaluating the Efficacy of the Webinar Modality for Lifelong Learning in Ministry

GLENN MELVILLE

The educational use of webinars experienced exponential growth in the twenty-first century, reflecting a global trend towards digitalization that has transformed the way in which “education is designed, delivered, and implemented” (Gegenfurtner and Ebner 2019, 2). The Covid pandemic in 2020 further accelerated a shift to online learning modalities for professional development due to its flexible access and affordability. This chapter presents an argument that webinars are well suited as a learning modality for continuing ministerial development. Existing in the ecotone of lifelong learning for ministry, webinars bridge the gap between the academy and the church, taking theological education into the workplaces and homes of pastors and lay church leaders and equipping them to stay current in their ministry thinking and practice.

This argument is supported by the findings of a survey of participants in the Carey Centre (The Centre) for Lifelong Learning webinar program in 2025. The Centre was established in 2017 as a department of Carey Baptist College located in Auckland, New Zealand, to support the continuing ministerial development of church and mission

leaders. Most people engaging with The Centre are associated with the Baptist Union of New Zealand. These include pastors, ministry leaders, church elders and deacons, and small group leaders. Learning resources include webinars, in-person workshops, on-demand video based teaching, and small group studies.

The chapter presents key characteristics that moderated the effectiveness of these webinars, the benefits of the webinar modality, and its limitations. The chapter concludes with recommendations for how program directors can best utilise webinars as part of a lifelong learning in ministry curriculum.

Webinar Development

Webinars are “web-based seminars, in which participants and facilitators communicate live over the Internet across distant geographical locations” through synchronous sharing of audio and video streams for the purpose of education” (Gegenfurtner and Ebner 2019, 1). From 2019 to 2025, The Centre delivered 251 hours of webinar content. In 2024, The Centre administered a survey to gauge the level of interest in a list of 17 proposed topics for the following year. Based on the feedback, The Centre offered 11 webinar series, consisting of two to four 60-minute webinars each. To present the webinars, The Centre recruited leading academics and practitioners in their fields, including local and internationally based presenters.

The pedagogical approach of the webinars largely reflects teacher-centered learning, which positions the teacher as the expert who imparts knowledge to the students. Presenters were instructed to prepare a 45-minute lecture and allow for 15 minutes of discussion. However, some presenters utilised a blend of teacher-centered and student-centered learning styles, facilitating collaborative learning with learners to understand and apply concepts. Presenters utilised slide shows in most of the webinars, and participants interacted with the presenters through a chat function, cameras, and microphones. However, instructors rarely used other interactive features, such as break out rooms, polls, and whiteboards. After each webinar, registrants received a link to a recording of the webinar, slide show presentation, and any additional resources and homework exercises.

Evaluating Webinar Effectiveness

To determine the effectiveness of webinars in equipping church leaders to stay current in their ministry thinking and practice, The Centre conducted a participant survey in 2025.¹ At the time of the survey, nine of the eleven webinar series had been completed. Of 198 webinar registrants, 54 completed the survey, resulting in a 27.3% response rate. Most attended a majority of the live sessions (52%, $n = 28$), many engaged with a roughly equal mix of live sessions and recordings (39%, $n = 21$), and a few mostly watched the recordings (9%, $n = 5$). The Centre achieved high attendance rates by sending reminders 24 hours and one hour before each webinar episode.

The survey captured self-reported ratings for the effectiveness of each webinar series in equipping respondents to stay current in their ministry thinking and practice (Table 1). Responses were rated using a five-point Likert scale from very poor (1) to very good (5). Respondents were asked to provide rationale for their ratings, which were coded and analysed thematically (Braun and Clarke 2006). Respondents reported an average rating of 4.4 and 4.2 out of 5, for the ability of the webinars to help them stay current in ministry thinking and practice, respectively. The highest ratings across both measures were awarded to *It Takes a Church*, *Climate Crisis*, and *Singing and Praying the Psalms*. Conversely, the lowest rating was awarded to *The Gospel and Discipleship*. In most cases, webinars received slightly higher ratings for increasing knowledge than practical application.

Staying Current in Ministry Thinking

The ability of webinars to help church leaders stay current in their thinking is seen as a major benefit of this modality of learning (24 responses). The most frequently mentioned reasons for rating webinars highly to help church leaders stay current in their ministry thinking is that the content was informative, engaging, practical, and relevant as the following two comments illustrate:

There were many helpful concepts and ideas that the speaker shared . . . I think the big picture idea of equipping church leaders to manage their staff and volunteers is incredibly important in the context of today's world, so would strongly encourage this to be held again in the future.

Table 1
Survey Results Regarding Effectiveness of Each of The Centre’s 2025 Webinars

		MINISTRY THINKING			MINISTRY PRACTICE	
WEBINAR	NO. OF RESPONSES	MEAN	SD	NO. OF RESPONSES	MEAN	SD
Being the Family of God: A Spirit Constituted Reality	13	4.5	0.93	11	4.2	0.57
Effective Leadership of Church Staff, Volunteers, and Team Management	22	4.1	0.76	19	4.0	1.02
Holy Spirit Led Ministry	15	4.0	0.73	15	4.2	0.75
How can the Church Respond to the Climate Crisis?	6	4.7	0.75	6	5.0	0.00
It takes a Church to Raise a Parent	12	4.7	0.62	12	4.5	0.65
Kingdom Leaders - Shifts that lead to multiplication	9	4.0	0.82	8	3.5	0.87
Singing and Praying the Psalms in Aotearoa	5	5.0	0.00	5	5.0	0.00
The Gospel and Discipleship: Unpacking the Riches of the Gospel of Mark	9	3.9	0.99	9	3.7	0.94
What has Grace to do with Economics?	5	4.4	0.49	5	3.8	0.75
		Average 4.4			Average 4.2	

Note: N = 49 (5 responses were deemed invalid)

The content of both series selected was highly engaging and extended my current thinking on Christ centered gathering and gave an additional encouragement to think beyond financial giving as we encourage generosity and teach “whole” life mission including financial life.

Another reason the webinars were deemed effective is that they provided new insights and provoked new thinking about various aspects of ministry (7 responses). One participant commented:

I really enjoy this form of learning for helping me to think more deeply about my area of ministry but also general leadership and theology. I try to choose a range of topics each year, across all 3 of these areas. It’s a great way to engage with experts and Carey lecturers.

Higher ratings were also given to webinars when the presenters were thought to be knowledgeable and engaging in their presentation style (9 responses). One person stated, “[the presenter] is so on point for ministry leaders in both the intergenerational and parenting for faith space. She is engaging and practical and was able to answer questions really well.” Respondents also commented on how they found the Q&A helpful (5 responses) and especially appreciated the opportunity to turn their cameras on. As one person commented, “I marked up those [webinars] who had the most time shared where we were all on-screen, rather than a ‘lecture.’” Conversely, lower ratings were given when people perceived that the content was not new and lacked relevancy to their ministry (7 responses). Some also noted poor delivery: “a lot of the presentation is just reading through what’s on the slides and not super easy to engage with.”

Staying Current in Ministry Practice

While webinars can be effective in increasing participants’ knowledge, church leaders perceive webinars as slightly less effective in helping them stay current in their ministry practice. The main reason was the perceived lack of application or relevance (8 responses): “The webinars did everything that this mode could do to support application, but this mode isn’t as effective as apprenticeship, mentoring, or shared implementation, when it comes to application.” Conversely, the most significant factor was the perceived ability of presenters to provide ideas that were readily applicable to their ministry (21 responses): “The examples used were so good that I could have basically used them the

next week in our worship gathering.” Higher ratings were given for content perceived to be relevant to a church leader’s ministry context (9 responses). Another factor is the usefulness of additional resources to aid the application of webinar content (4 responses), for example, “The worksheets for reflection and the content helped with application in my work context.”

Characteristics that Moderate Webinar Effectiveness

While the above qualitative insights help explain the variation in ratings for webinars to help church leaders stay current in their ministry thinking and practice, additional insights were gleaned by asking respondents to rate The Centre’s webinars on characteristics that are known to moderate webinar effectiveness (Table 2). Each item was assessed on a five-point scale: ranging from “strongly disagree” (1) to “strongly agree” (5). The characteristics that respondents agreed had the greatest impact on webinar effectiveness were relevant ministry topics (4.4), providing ongoing access to the recordings (4.6), and recruiting competent speakers (4.5).

Table 2
Survey Results Regarding Characteristics that Moderate Webinar Effectiveness

WEBINAR CHARACTERISTIC	MEAN	SD
The topic(s) were relevant to my ministry context	4.4	0.65
Competent speakers with effective communication skills	4.5	0.69
The content was delivered at an appropriate pace	4.0	0.88
The length of the webinar series was appropriate for the topic(s).	4.1	0.79
Use of visuals (slideshow presentation, videos, websites)	4.2	0.78
Interactive Q&A	3.9	1.02
Additional resources provided or suggested via post webinar email (articles, books, websites)	4.1	1.00
Course homework/application tasks between webinars	3.5	0.94
Providing ongoing access to the recordings	4.6	0.76

Note: N = 54

Slightly less effective were the pacing of content (4.0) and length of series appropriate for the topic (4.1). Significantly, participants perceived some presenters as providing too much content: “the amount of material was probably more than could effectively be covered in the time available, so the pace was faster than ideal.” Participants suggested either reducing the content or spreading it out over more sessions (6 responses).

Another area identified for improvement was the provision of additional resources (4.1). This was in the form of resources and/or homework between sessions to aid learning and application (4 responses). As one person commented:

I think having something to engage with in between session[s] would have helped me to stay more aligned with thought and practice during the course of the webinar. It felt a bit disjointed coming back to something that we had had 1hr long discussion on a week in the past without prompts to reflect in between.

There was also a lack of agreement that Q&A aided the effectiveness of the webinars (3.9), even though most of the webinars offered Q&A via the chat function and cameras/microphones. One of the most frequent suggestions for improving webinars was for more interaction (5 responses). This could include utilising break-out rooms, the lecturer providing discussion questions rather than relying on attendees to ask questions and forming cohorts who meet to view a webinar and then discuss.

The webinars with the highest ratings provide further evidence that increasing the level of interaction increases the effectiveness of webinars. These webinars provided the opportunity for people to introduce themselves and engage with the lecturer throughout the content delivery. As various people commented, “The presenter . . . was engaging, informative, and drew people out—it was interactive,” and “Outstanding content, great questions for discussion, immediately applicable to my context.”

The course homework and application between sessions received the lowest level of agreement in terms of effectiveness (3.5), likely reflecting the variation in approaches from The Centre’s webinar presenters, with only a small number providing homework. Several people thought some form of accountability or follow up would also be beneficial (3 responses). As one person commented:

The other thing is that I always feel like webinars lack the context for accountability, so if there was a structure for identifying the next practical step following the completion of a webinar and then some follow up to see how we were doing with what we had committed to, this might be helpful to solidify the learning in our lived-out realities.

The Centre's survey respondents named the accessibility of webinars as one of the key benefits of this modality of learning (29 responses). Specifically, respondents mentioned how webinar technology gave them access to quality teaching locally and globally. Additionally, they mentioned how the ability to access from anywhere saved them time, and how ongoing access to recordings enabled the opportunity for further study and growth. Respondents also mentioned the flexibility of webinars to fit into their busy schedules (9 responses). Less frequently mentioned benefits included: the short length of webinars providing a manageable learning commitment (3 responses) and the opportunity for peer learning provided through webinars (5 responses).

Limitations of Webinars Versus Other Forms of Learning

Detailed feedback on two in-person workshops illustrates the limitations of the webinar modality. Both workshops featured a blend of teacher-centered and student-centered learning styles.

An in-person preaching workshop was offered in 2025. This was a full day workshop that was co-presented. The pedagogical approach involved collaborative learning where students worked together to share ideas, solve problems, and actively engage in group discussions. To facilitate discussions students were organised into groups of 4–5 around tables. Using the same rating scale as the webinars, participants ($N = 7$) rated the in-person workshop slightly higher for content (4.8) and relevance (4.8) than the average for webinars (4.4 and 4.2). Participants also rated this workshop highly because of the co-leadership model of teaching, mix of theory, practical application, comprehensive and in-depth teaching, and the pacing of the sessions.

A second in-person workshop examined how emotional systems impact the functioning of a congregation. Over three days at a retreat centre, coaches facilitated student-centered learning through case

study work in peer learning groups of four. Each participant had the opportunity to share and reflect on two critical incidents from their ministry through the lens of Bowen Family Systems Theory. High rating for the usefulness of the cohort sessions to apply family systems theory is indicative of the effectiveness of student-centered learning facilitated in-person: the most frequently mentioned reason for rating the cohort sessions so highly was the relational aspect of the cohort. One respondent stated, “The openness and vulnerability of the participants were commendable, and it helped in the understanding of the practicality of ministry life and its challenges.” Similarly, another stated, “This is where the main learning took place for me. Applying the teaching to our own lived experiences. And helping others process their experiences.” Clearly, participants appreciated the relational aspects of this in-person workshop, which survey respondents deemed a major limitation of webinars.

The most frequently mentioned limitation of webinars was the lack of personal connection with others (16 responses). Relating to this, participants commented on the lack of opportunity for group discussion (10 responses). This was due to the limited timeframe of each webinar (1 hour), and the nature of being online versus in-person. As one participant commented, “[The Webinar] never really feels like a substitute for sitting down with a group of people and fleshing things out together.” Other respondents found it challenging to ask questions in the online format (3 responses). The reasons for this included not being able to “read the room” and finding it difficult to multitask, which includes listening, reflecting, and writing questions in the chat. Less frequently mentioned limitations included: the self-motivation required for online learning to be effective (2 responses); it is easy to become distracted during online learning (3 respondents); and the lack of accountability for applying learnings (2 respondents).

In summary, the major limitation of webinars is that they cannot replicate the level of human interaction enabled by in-person events, which generally results in deeper learning and application. Despite the use of interactive online tools, there is a lack of energy and dynamism integral to in-person presentations and events (Arruda 2020). This lack of human connection is amplified as the number of participants increases. For example, if there are many people on the webinar the use of the chat box for discussion is not effective as messages move up quickly, and it is easy to miss messages (Inal et al. 2023). Additionally, the short duration of webinars limits the

ability to build student-lecturer relationships, peer-to-peer community, learner agency, and personalisation of the learning process.

Effective Webinar Design

How then can webinars be utilised effectively for ongoing ministry education? To maximize effectiveness, webinar design should be informed by established educational principles of teaching and learning “that apply to online and blended learning environments” (Reyna et al. 2020, 265). To utilise webinars effectively for ongoing education, webinar design should adopt a blended pedagogical approach involving teacher and student-centered learning. Program directors should consult with a wide variety of stakeholders to identify relevant topic ideas, then test the level of interest in these ideas via surveys. Program directors would also do well to recruit competent speakers with effective communication skills who can collaborate with students in the digital space. In this regard, webinar presenters should be equipped to utilise all the interactive tools at their disposal to maximise learning. Webinar content should be carefully curated based on webinar length, allowing time for collaboration. Providing opportunities for ongoing learning post the live webinar is also beneficial in reinforcing learning. Finally, employing methods for continual evaluation enables constant refining of webinar effectiveness.

Adopt a Blended Pedagogical Approach

One of the distinctives of all three webinars that received the highest ratings was utilising a blend of teacher-centered and learner-centered pedagogical approaches. For example, *It Takes a Church* dedicated a whole episode for group discussion of questions raised in the first 2 episodes. *Praying the Psalms* facilitated collaborative learning where participants worked through a psalm together with the presenter playing the role of a guide. *Climate Crisis* sought to understand participants’ contexts, reasons for attending, and questions, and then molded the content accordingly. Adopting a blended pedagogical approach is therefore considered more effective than a traditional teacher-centered approach alone, implemented as follows.

Identify Relevant Ministry Topics

Adopting a student-centered approach requires choosing topics that are perceived to be relevant to pastors' ministry contexts. This characteristic significantly impacts webinar effectiveness for ongoing education, as shown by the data above. To achieve this end, consultation with a wide variety of stakeholders is recommended, including denominational leadership, academic faculty, regional leadership, pastors, and lay ministry leaders. Additionally, lifelong learning program directors would benefit from establishing a network with other lifelong learning providers to share resources and topic ideas. To refine a potential list of topics, surveys are particularly helpful. In The Centre's experience, the level of interest in potential topics identified through surveys consistently corresponds to actual registrations.

Recruit Competent Speakers

One of the strengths of webinars is that their accessibility enables the opportunity to recruit well-known and respected speakers from all corners of the globe. The findings indicated that recruiting competent speakers with effective communication skills had a significant influence on the effectiveness of webinars. This finding is consistent with wider webinar research that considers it best practice to recruit known, respected guest speakers with effective communication skills (Inal et al. 2023; Zoumenou et al. 2015). However, effective learning also requires "teachers who are well-versed in leveraging technologies to support practices that are learner-centered, engaging, and motivating" (Archambault et al. 2022, 178). Therefore, well-known and respected speakers should be recruited who can operate in the digital space.

In The Centre's experience, recruiting leading academics and practitioners in their fields has received an overwhelmingly favourable response, despite the fact The Centre is in New Zealand, a small island nation located in the southwestern Pacific Ocean. The generosity of the global academic community is also demonstrated through accepting lower honoraria than normal and in some cases giving their time pro bono. However, emphasis needs to be placed on recruiting presenters and/or equipping presenters who can adopt a student-centered approach.

Incorporate Interactive Elements

To facilitate greater engagement in learning and to aid application, interactive elements should be incorporated in the webinar design (Reyna et al. 2020; Al-Naabi 2023). This technique includes the strategic use of cameras and microphones, breakout rooms, polls, Q&A sessions, and collaboration through whiteboards. Increasing the effectiveness of Q&A deserves particular focus. One of the challenges of synchronous communication is that it does not allow time for reflection (LaPointe and Reisetter 2008). Consequently, webinar attendees are often reluctant to ask questions. In The Centre's experience, there is greater engagement when the presenter provides specific discussion questions, rather than simply asking "does anyone have a question or feedback?" It is also considered best practice to deliver Q&A throughout the delivery of content, rather than at the end of a webinar alone (Zoumenou et al. 2015).

Curate Content for Webinar Length

Content needs to be carefully curated to fit the webinar length and allow time for more collaboration. According to the surveys, the effectiveness of webinars was negatively impacted when presenters were too teacher-centric, evidenced by delivering too much content within too few sessions. Therefore, careful consideration needs to be given to match the length of the webinar series with the chosen topic (Reyna et al. 2020; Inal et al. 2023). Program directors should also work with presenters on the focus for each webinar to ensure that the content can be delivered at an appropriate pace, allowing time for collaboration.

Provide Opportunities for Ongoing Learning

To encourage ongoing learning, additional resources, course homework, and ongoing access to recordings should be provided.

Continual Evaluation

Finally, methods for continual evaluation of the effectiveness of webinars should be employed. In this regard, The Centre's webinar host regularly provides feedback to presenters immediately after each webinar episode. The Centre also utilises feedback surveys.

Conclusion

The experience of the Carey Centre for Lifelong Learning suggests that webinars are well suited as a learning modality in the ecotone of lifelong learning for ministry. Webinars help equip church leaders to stay current in their ministry thinking and practice by minimizing the barriers to theological education and providing access to leading academics and practitioners from around the world. The webinar modality for continuing ministerial development is valuable in equipping church leaders to stay current in their ministry thinking and practice, across a broad range of topics. Because of their accessibility, webinars remove barriers to theological education so that more people can access the training that they need. However, due to the limitation of a lack of personal connection, webinars should be used strategically alongside other forms of learning as part of a lifelong learning curriculum. Webinars can be used effectively, in a relatively short time, to disseminate information to increase church leaders' knowledge and offer practical examples applied to ministry contexts—whereas skill development and formational work is deemed more effective via in-person training such as workshops.

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Notes

- 1 The study received ethical approval from the Carey Baptist College Ethics Committee on 16 July 2025. All subjects provided informed consent to participate in the research. Responses reported in this chapter are de-identified to protect anonymity. Two limitations of the study need to be noted. First, instead of using a survey, semi-structured interviews should be considered for future research to yield richer research data. Second, the survey responses for some webinars were low, raising the issue of non-response bias.

The Center for Asian American Christianity and the Future of Theological Education

DAVID C. CHAO AND JOSHUA E. LIVINGSTON

The Center for Asian American Christianity (CAAC) functions within Princeton Theological Seminary's academic ecosystem as a generative ecotone in North American theological education. Created, hosted, and sustained by the Seminary, the CAAC brings into conversation longstanding denominational traditions and the lived theologies of global, diasporic Christian communities. In doing so, it exemplifies and advances Princeton Seminary's commitment to contextually grounded scholarship, public engagement, and the flourishing of diverse theological communities, enriching the Seminary's broader mission and institutional life.

This positioning represents strategic rather than accidental placement. The CAAC responds to what Ted Smith (2023) and David C. Chao (2024) both name as a fundamental challenge facing contemporary Christianity: denominational forms continue to carry institutional momentum even as their capacity to sustain spiritual engagement has weakened. Smith shows how these systems can harden into patterns that inadvertently narrow the church's imagination, while Chao demonstrates that their theological categories and styles of reasoning

often reflect Anglo-European histories that do not travel well into the worlds shaped by migration and diaspora. Denominations arose out of an Anglo-European Christendom context, where ethnic and regional differences were represented through confessional and doctrinal differentiation (Niebuhr 1929). Their inherited structures and doctrinal grammars do not always readily accommodate the increasingly diverse Christian communities that have emerged through global migration. In that widening gap, centers like the CAAC become innovative spaces for interpreting these transitions and for cultivating forms of theological life that meet the church as it exists today.

The CAAC treats this moment as an invitation to bring the seminary's intellectual resources into sustained conversation with the lived experiences of Asian North American Christians. By attending to communities and questions that are often on the margins of North American theological education, the Center operates as an ecotone that enriches both seminary life and the wider communities it serves. In this institutional setting, the CAAC advances an audience-centered approach to theological education that complements established degree programs and traditional scholarly publishing. Rather than beginning with established content and hoping readers will follow, the Center begins with the concrete needs of its community of more than five thousand Asian North American Christians and develops resources responsive to those needs. In so doing, the CAAC embodies Princeton Seminary's broader commitment to work that is attentive to material contexts, engaged with the world beyond the campus, and rooted in the diverse realities of the church today.

Drawing on John Hwang's philosophy of public scholarship, the CAAC operates in an ecotone where academic rigor encounters community engagement, where established theological frameworks meet diasporic spiritual practices, and where institutional authority works together with the specific needs of spiritual and congregational formation. In this way, the Center is positioned not as the hero of its own narrative, but as a guide supporting Asian North American Christians navigating an increasingly complex cultural and religious landscape.¹

Transformation of the Denominational Ecosystem

The CAAC's approach is a significant case study for many institutions and demographics working in theological education and

lifelong learning, but it requires attending to the scale and depth of the transformations reshaping North American Christianity itself. Both Smith and Chao, from different angles, press on a similar point: over time, denominationalism can take on the character of an institutional logic that, in certain settings, narrows the church's capacity for engagement and renewal. What began as a vehicle for shared mission and theological coherence has, in some instances, developed patterns of self-preservation that prioritize continuity and stability. These patterns do not define every denominational body, nor do they negate the genuine goods denominations have sustained. Yet they can make it more difficult for communities situated along racial, economic, and cultural margins to find ready recognition and support. The challenge before us, then, is not simply a story of denominational decline, but a careful examination of how inherited structures organize Christian life in ways that may, at times, limit the very forms of vitality they seek to cultivate.

Ted Smith traces how theological education in the United States moved from serving a colonial social order to functioning as the professional school of a denominational network. Under the older "Standing Order" (Smith 2023, 2), church and state were so closely aligned that separate seminaries were largely unnecessary. Once disestablishment unraveled that arrangement, seminaries were reorganized to form clergy for a new associational world of congregations, benevolent societies, and denominations. In this setting, theology supplied the language through which these institutions understood their work as participation in God's redemptive ordering of the nation. The professional model that emerged trained ministers not simply in doctrine but in the management of religious organizations whose vitality was tied to the imagination of a white Protestant America. Even as that social imaginary has thinned under conditions of neoliberal individualization and declining denominational loyalty, the institutional form persists. Seminaries continue to inhabit structures built to sustain denominational systems, and theology remains entangled in the reproduction of those forms.

Smith's description of "undead" denominational structures (2023, 138–39) names this tension: institutions that endure even as the social conditions that once animated them have shifted. The professional model continues to organize authority, credentialing, and theological reasoning in ways that presume denominational maintenance as a central task. In this account, theology risks functioning as a technology of institutional preservation. It

can be drawn into instrumental logics in which doctrinal clarity and ecclesial formation come to be valued in part for the ways they sustain inherited systems.

Chao widens the frame. The professional denominational ecology Smith analyzes rests upon an older grammar that predates the American seminary. From the Protestant Reformation onward, confessional differentiation bound claims to catholic truth to particular regional, ethnic, and national projects. The 1517 Project did more than generate theological debate; it institutionalized a habit of marking Christian identity through doctrinal boundary-making. Confessions were not merely clarifications of belief. They helped secure civilizational coherence within emerging nation-states. In that setting, catholicity was claimed in universal terms while simultaneously tethered to specific ethnic and political formations (Chao 2024).

American denominationalism inherits this habit. The doctrinal vocabularies that seminaries prize did not arise in abstraction from social life. They were forged within Christendom contexts where Christian identity and national belonging were tightly intertwined. When transplanted to the United States, these confessional habits continued to align theological distinctions with racialized and regional identities. The modernist–fundamentalist controversies and subsequent culture wars did not create this dynamic *ex nihilo*. They carried forward a pattern in which doctrinal differentiation signaled competing visions for Christian society (Chao 2024, 401–9).

Yet the conditions that once stabilized this alignment no longer hold. Migration has reconfigured the ecclesial landscape. The same confessional and evangelical grammars now circulate within communities shaped by caste oppression, postcolonial nationalism, and transpacific displacement. Asian congregations in North America navigating racialization inhabit the inherited doctrinal tradition under markedly different social conditions. In these settings, shared confessions are pressed toward different ends. They function as resources for dignity, community formation, and endurance in minority status. The propositional content of doctrine may remain stable, but its inferential life shifts as it is taken up within new racial and political worlds (Chao 2024, 410–17; Chao 2026).

This does not mean that Asian or Asian American churches stand outside the older triad of denominations, seminaries, and congregations. They often inhabit those architectures and remain constrained by their racial and economic hierarchies. At the same

time, their practices expose the contingency of the Christendom inheritance. They reveal how precarious it is to assume that denominational systems safeguard Christian truth in any straightforward way. The same doctrinal grammar that once helped stabilize a white Protestant national imaginary now circulates within communities whose social location unsettles that imaginary.

Placed alongside Smith's diagnosis of institutional persistence, Chao's account of migratory doctrinal use reframes the present moment. The denominational ecosystem is being reshaped not only by institutional decline but also by the global redistribution of Christianity itself (Chao 2024, 409–18). Catholicity can no longer be imagined primarily as the extension of a Euro-American confessional system. It must be understood as the Spirit's work of gathering a genuinely global communion whose local embodiments do not map neatly onto inherited denominational boundaries (Chao 2026).

In this light, theological education should be described with greater historical and social attentiveness. Seminaries that once took shape within a denominational order tied to a particular racial and national settlement now find themselves situated within a far more complex ecclesial ecology—one marked by migration, religious plurality, and asymmetries of power that cannot be ignored. Centers such as the CAAC inhabit this altered terrain. Their work unfolds at the intersection of inherited confessional grammars and the lived realities of communities whose histories do not neatly align with the denominational structures that once stabilized theological identity. The task is to discern how shared confessions are embodied across differing social locations and to cultivate habits of interpretation that take those locations seriously. In that process, theological education becomes attentive to forms of Christian life that extend beyond the Christendom assumptions that once gave denominationalism its coherence, even as it continues to receive and work within that inheritance.

The ecotone, then, names the overlapping terrain where inherited confessional forms and migratory embodiments of faith encounter one another. Within that terrain, theology becomes a disciplined practice of catholic discernment, attentive to how doctrine travels, how it is reinhabited, and how it might be received anew in a church no longer bounded by the social world that first gave denominationalism its coherence (Chao 2026).

Migration and the Creation of Structural Holes

The decline of denominational authority coincides with Christianity's fundamental reconfiguration in US society, especially after 1965 through migration (Hong 2024). This transformation has created structural holes—gaps in social networks where strategic actors can create competitive advantage by bridging disconnected groups and facilitating information flow (Burt 2009, 2–3, 14). People positioned at these gaps gain a distinct advantage because they access nonredundant information, broker relationships, and synthesize perspectives that others cannot see (Burt 2004, 349–54). Global migration has unsettled inherited Christendom imaginaries by foregrounding the historically polycentric and migratory dynamics through which Christian communities have taken shape across cultural and political boundaries (Hanciles 2021, 1–3, 410–12). This transformation reflects the dynamic and manifold nature of global Christianity, shaped by ongoing transnational migration and cross-cultural-fertilization. Traditional Christendom models assumed stable geographical and cultural boundaries providing foundations for consistent doctrinal and institutional development. Migration disrupts these assumptions by creating new forms of Christian community that transcend traditional boundaries while creating new challenges for theological understanding.

This intersection of geographic and theological realities within Asian North America is precisely the space the CAAC addresses. Migration has remapped the Christian landscape, creating structural holes where established institutions and inherited denominational frameworks no longer connect well with the lived experiences of diasporic communities. These gaps are openings where new forms of theological imagination and community life can take root. From its vantage point within Princeton Seminary, the CAAC recognizes the fertility of these emerging spaces, developing forms of theological engagement that arise from the material conditions of Asian North American Christian life.

The CAAC as Theological Ecotone

Within the evolving ecology of theological education, the CAAC operates as an ecotone in the wider North American theological landscape by deepening connections between the Seminary's scholarly resources and

the lived theologies of Asian North American Christian communities. From its place within the Seminary, the Center convenes interactions across cultural and institutional boundaries, facilitates the exchange of knowledge and resources, and advances innovations that serve all participants. John Hwang's analysis of the Protestant Reformation provides important historical context for understanding the CAAC's strategic positioning. Hwang observes that Martin Luther succeeded where earlier reformers like Jan Hus failed not because of different theological content—both challenged papal authority, criticized indulgences, and affirmed the primacy of biblical authority—but because Luther possessed a decisive technological advantage. The printing press enabled “Luther’s disciples to out print and out replicate their Catholic counterparts about five to one,” demonstrating that effective distribution, rather than content alone, determines theological influence (Hwang 2022). Hwang argues that contemporary Christianity faces an even more significant technological disruption: “[T]he internet as well as the mobile phone, the supercomputers that are in your pockets have ushered in the greatest disruption in communication since the printing press” (2022).

This historical parallel suggests that the challenge facing traditional theological institutions concerns distribution as much as content. Like Hus before Luther, contemporary seminaries confront the possibility of diminishing public resonance not because their scholarship lacks depth or rigor, but because their modes of circulation have not always kept pace with changing technological and communicative conditions. The CAAC approaches this moment as an opportunity for strategic recalibration. As an ecotone occupying a structural gap, the Center expands channels of access to diverse perspectives and resources, fosters conversations and partnerships that enrich both academic and public life, and, with institutional support, exercises the adaptability and creativity needed to extend Princeton Seminary’s mission into emerging spaces of theological formation.

This institutional location provides sustained access to the cultural and theological diversity of Asian North American Christianity and brings that richness into wider conversation across North American theological education. By connecting these resources with the seminary’s scholarly traditions, the Center fosters mutual learning and collaborative inquiry. Beyond facilitation, it contributes substantively to cross-cultural engagement, serving as a leading contributor to theological resources responsive to the migrational realities of Asian North American Christians, while reflecting the academic and scholarly

depth and sophistication for which Princeton Theological Seminary is known. In this way, the CAAC embodies the Seminary's commitment to widening access to theological learning, strengthening the connections between scholarship and ministry practice, and fostering a vibrant community of learners shaped by Princeton's distinctive academic and hybrid educational environment.

The CAAC's most significant technological innovation lies in adopting a distribution-first approach to theological education. Rather than beginning with traditional academic products—books, journal articles, formal degree programs—and seeking audiences, the CAAC inverts this model. Traditional theological education operates on what Hwang (2022) termed the “Field of Dreams fallacy,” assuming quality scholarship will naturally draw audiences through established channels. Rather, the CAAC's audience-centered approach is not only about expanding the range and distribution of content; it also invites a fresh way of thinking about how theological education can take shape in a digital age. The CAAC begins with its audience of over five thousand Asian North American Christians, engaging their concrete spiritual needs, pressing concerns, and preferred engagement modes, then creates content specifically designed to serve those identified needs. This approach recognizes that contemporary audiences increasingly bypass traditional institutional structures in favor of personalized voices and community-centered resources.

The Center's sophisticated multi-platform strategy offers layered engagement, providing multiple entry points and commitment levels designed to meet diverse needs within the Asian North American Christian community. At the most accessible level, email newsletters and short blog posts provide quick, digestible theological insights absorbable during brief moments in busy lives. For those seeking deeper engagement, podcasts and webinars ranging from thirty to ninety minutes offer nuanced conversations on racial justice, mental health, discipleship, and leadership development. At the highest commitment level, day-long and multi-day conferences create immersive spaces for collective theological reflection and community formation.

This tiered approach honors contemporary life realities while maintaining intellectual rigor and spiritual depth. By meeting learners where they are—both literally and figuratively—the CAAC has created pathways for theological formation serving diasporic communities' actual needs. The Center understands its role as walking alongside Asian North American Christians, helping them navigate their own

paths of faith and leadership within increasingly complex social and religious landscapes.

Innovation Through Alternative Forms of Theological Formation

The CAAC's focus on three core areas—intergenerational family life, social history of migration and racialization, and an overall frame of biblical theology—grows out of sustained attention to the pressures and questions shaping Asian North American Christian life. These priorities reflect the cultural and theological needs that ministry leaders and congregations regularly navigate. They are not abstract categories but lived realities that call for theological resources attentive to the social histories, cultural contexts, and spiritual commitments of transpacific Asian Christian communities.

This approach represents an alternative model of theological formation—one that moves away from institutional prestige and denominational endorsement and relies more on substantive engagement with community needs and demonstrable impact on spiritual formation. As Hwang (2022) notes, contemporary audiences increasingly bypass traditional institutional structures favoring relevant topics and community-centered resources. The CAAC embraces this shift, building credibility through consistent delivery of valuable content and responsiveness to community feedback.

This authority grows out of the Center's sustained engagement with the concrete spiritual needs of Asian North American Christians. Through inter-institutional collaboration, the CAAC's annual gatherings, including the Mental Health Conferences (<https://ourflourishing.org/>) and the Asian American "Our Stories, Our Faith" Conferences (<https://ourstoriesourfaith.org/>), reflect this posture by creating spaces for dialogue, worship, and shared theological reflection. These gatherings bring together a wide range of voices across ethnic, generational, and denominational lines, inviting participants to learn from one another and to discern together what faithful Christian life looks like in their communities.

The Center's commitment to making scholarly insights accessible in multiple languages and contexts extends its reach beyond traditional academic boundaries. By partnering with denominational networks, parachurch ministries, and other faith-based organizations, the CAAC

seeks to extend its theological resources to practitioners, leaders, and scholars who might never otherwise engage traditional academic institutions. This represents fundamental shifts from viewing theological education as the accreditation of a professional managerial class to understanding it as an ongoing process of community empowerment and spiritual formation—both forms of lifelong learning.

Implications for Post-Denominational Theological Education

Across theological education, academic leaders increasingly acknowledge a structural realignment. Artificial intelligence, digital delivery, and changing labor markets have weakened the default authority of traditional credentials while prospective learners signal preference for certificates, non-degree pathways, and hybrid formats that integrate with existing employment. For long-established institutions, this realignment presses beyond programmatic expansion and into questions of institutional identity. Residential degree programs—particularly the MDiv and the PhD—remain central to the seminary's vocation and require sustained intellectual and financial investment. At the same time, the growth of non-degree pathways, certificate programs, and hybrid forms of formation reflects genuine shifts in how Christian leaders seek theological education. These developments call for more than the addition of new offerings. They invite careful attention to staffing, governance, and budgeting so that newer forms of lifelong learning are integrated into the institution's mission rather than layered on top of it in ways that strain existing commitments. What emerges is not a simple choice between models, nor a zero-sum competition for resources. The more apt image is ecological. Residential and non-degree formations increasingly inhabit the same institutional terrain. When thoughtfully cultivated, they can deepen and inform one another, generating new forms of theological life at their intersection.

This dual temporality has operational consequences. Faculty fatigue intensifies when expanded degree offerings are layered with expectations to serve non-degree audiences, prompting leadership to model scenarios, cost out instructional capacity, and map the true price of growth in hybrid programs. In this environment, centers like the CAAC function as prototyping labs: they extend scholarly rigor to communities that cannot access traditional pathways, practice public

scholarship, and translate ethnography and oral history into constructive theology without surrendering depth. They also suggest concrete curricular bridges—such as travel courses tethered to place-based public-scholarship projects—that convert audience-facing work into credit-bearing formation. In ecological terms, the CAAC demonstrates how institutional mission can be amplified through edge-effect abundance, where residential formation and public scholarship meet and generate new theological life.

Moreover, the CAAC's approach offers insights extending far beyond Asian North American Christianity. The Center's emphasis on contextual theology, community-centered content creation, and multi-platform distribution provides a framework adaptable by other institutions seeking to serve diverse populations in increasingly complex religious landscapes. By demonstrating how theological education can honor both intellectual depth and cultural specificity, the CAAC has created a model that could help revitalize theological education more broadly.

The ecological metaphor proves particularly useful for understanding these implications. Just as natural ecotones often serve as harbingers of environmental change, the CAAC's innovations may indicate broader transformations occurring within theological education. The Center's emphasis on digital distribution, community engagement, and contextual relevance reflects adaptations other institutions may need to embrace as traditional denominational structures continue declining and new forms of Christian community continue emerging.

Cultivating Theological Biodiversity

The CAAC represents more than an innovative program within a mainline seminary. It offers a glimpse of how theological education can take new shape in a moment when inherited structures no longer map neatly onto many of the lived realities of Christian communities in the United States. By locating itself in the structural gap between academic theology and diasporic Christian life, the Center has created a lifelong learning ecotone where established boundaries loosen and new forms of theological imagination can emerge.

The CAAC's audience-centered posture, its commitment to community-shaped content, and its readiness to experiment with modes of engagement show how institutions can inhabit this ecotone with purpose. By facilitating vibrant intersections between church, society,

and academy, the CAAC has shown how theological education can become a site of discovery and innovation, fostering the theological biodiversity essential for Christianity's continued witness and impact.

These developments unfold within broader transformations in American Christianity, where the waning of denominational authority has introduced both instability and new openings. The future of theological education will not be determined simply by preserving inherited structures, especially when those structures no longer align easily with the lived realities of many Christian communities. Nor will it be secured by abandoning those inheritances altogether. What seems increasingly necessary is the cultivation of spaces in which the breadth of global Christianity can be received with intellectual honesty, theological curiosity, and pastoral care.

The CAAC's work offers one example of how institutions might inhabit this transitional moment. When seminaries understand themselves as facilitators of encounter across ecclesial and cultural worlds, they often discover renewed purpose. By nurturing theological biodiversity—through adaptive forms of teaching, sustained community engagement, and cross-cultural theological reflection—the CAAC serves Asian North American Christians while also sketching a possible trajectory for theological education within a landscape no longer organized primarily by denominational allegiance.

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Notes

- 1 This chapter is written in grateful memory of John Hwang (†2023), a trusted colleague, collaborator, and friend, whose vision decisively shaped the Center for Asian American Christianity's commitment to public scholarship.

Nurture

Forming Lifelong Learner-Practitioners

Theological Literacy Across the Ecology

JODI L. PORTER

Spoiler alert: in this chapter, I am concerned not simply with the thriving of lifelong learning programs. Instead, I am concerned with the impact of theological education as a whole, including what usually qualify as core programs (accredited degrees) as well as continuing education or lifelong learning (for example, CEUs, certificates, and micro-credentials). At Acadia Divinity College (ADC) in Wolfville, Nova Scotia, we are leveraging a Pathways for Tomorrow grant from Lilly Endowment Inc. to track emerging congregational and cultural trends and to conduct leading-edge research in education. Emerging insights from this work guide *all* our teaching and learning efforts, from our MDiv to our newest micro-credentials. We are wondering: how can we future-proof theological education?

First, a confession. Even as I work at a seminary whose primary constituency is a particular denomination (in our case, the Canadian Baptists of Atlantic Canada), and even as we have recruited our largest entering class of MDiv students in years, I remain committed to the broader role and possibilities of theological education in the public square. Originally from the United States, I cannot help but notice

what feels like the gross misrepresentation of Christian traditions in national, state, and local conversations. Theological education matters because it cultivates the next generation of leaders for our churches. And theological education matters because it shapes how we relate well to each other in our communities. It shapes how we embody what Jesus asks us all to do: be good neighbors. Cultivating beloved community, as Martin Luther King Jr. called us to try, involves what happens not only inside churches and seminaries but everywhere. Theological education is at the heart of beloved community. I wonder: what is the role of theological educators in this cultural moment? What do our churches, schools, and communities of the future need from us right now?

During ADC's 2020–2021 accreditation process with the Association of Theological Schools, we refined the program outcomes for our MDiv. Outcomes include, for example, to “interpret and apply Scripture to Christian faith and practice with critically informed exegetical and hermeneutical skills” (ADC 2025, 60). These program outcomes funnel down toward learning outcomes for each course, and faculty build a variety of learning outcomes based on the domains outlined in Bloom's Taxonomy and the Medicine Wheel (Centre for Teaching Excellence n.d.; Hogle n.d.; LaFever 2016). They imagine ways to form students for ministry through four domains of learning: cognitive, affective (emotional), psychomotor (performative), and spiritual. In this work, we reflect on the nature of theological literacy. How do we know when our work is “done”? What does our “ideal” MDiv graduate look like?

Our students arrive with diverse backgrounds and depart to serve in diverse contexts. In our context of Nova Scotia, we must reckon with the histories of Indigenous peoples, Acadians, and African Nova Scotians. Increasingly, we receive immigrants from Korea, India, and African countries into our churches and seminary. We realize we cannot curate a single experience for multiple diversities. Instead, in keeping with larger trends in theological higher education, we must imagine how to serve diverse students well.

This chapter invites theological educators to reflect on the essential nature and function of theological literacy across the ecology of theological education, including the ecotone of lifelong learning. I advocate for a broad definition of theological literacy that connects with the public square and involves not simply static content but rather a dynamic, wise posture. I contend that cultivation of robust theological literacy requires educators to include more heutagogy in their work (compared to pedagogy and andragogy), organizing disciplinary content to help

students develop facility with the pastoral cycle. I conclude with two tools we use at ADC to foster theological literacy in a time when students and the public desperately need theological education to be its best: Indigenous Appreciative Inquiry and generative artificial intelligence.

Nurturing Theological Literacy in Church and World

It seems straightforward to presume churches, denominations, and theological schools might work together to nurture theological literacy. “At its best, theological literacy is borne by the church, promoted by structures of ecclesial organization, and supported by church-related and other schools” (Petersen 2002, 93). In distinct yet interrelated ways, these institutions form leaders who continue the conversation that has unfolded since the birth, life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ. Though we interpret that history through unique ecclesial lenses, we have a common goal: to hand on the faith. What seems less straightforward, however, are the possible connections of theological literacy to broader publics and concerns outside church walls. Does theological literacy involve simply describing the Christian faith well amongst various value-laden identities in a postmodern world? Or does it also entail a more normative capacity of leveraging the Christian faith as a resource to address the needs of civil societies?

The core of theological education is a theological literacy containing many facets. A theologically literate student should be a competent congregational leader. They should embody theological understanding, spiritual maturity, and interpersonal responsibility amidst other congregational leaders, scholars, and laity (Cannell 2006, 28–33, 262–63, 279). *And* they should have skills to navigate religiously diverse public spaces in ways that contribute to civic life. They might work toward the latter by helping shape a common language for civil society, which I would call a “universalist” approach; or they might do so by representing the best of a particular religious tradition in the public square, which I would call a “communitarian” approach.¹ Essentially, I presume cultivating theological literacy entails preparing students from diverse backgrounds to minister, even sometimes prophetically, in various contexts both inside and outside the church. It involves shaping spaces of belonging in ecclesial contexts and beyond (Jennings 2020). It inspires asset-based approaches to trauma-informed community wellness efforts (Pommert and LeBlanc 2022). It leverages “*cabos*

sueltos” (loose ends) from oft-marginalized traditions to transform churches and communities (Conde-Frazier 2021).

The challenge is to nurture theological literacy for public arenas in which the most prominent versions of Christianity often seem not very Christlike. How do we push back against what feels like a theological illiteracy and raise up wise leaders who can shepherd beloved communities? As I write this chapter, the headlines include more tragic stories of school shootings and political assassinations in my home country. Shockingly, my Facebook feed evidences more outpourings of Christian concern for a murdered prominent, conservative political voice who regularly defended gun rights than for the simultaneous continued mass murders of our children through gun violence. I firmly believe that droves of Christians are getting public theology massively wrong these days, and our children will continue to pay the price (Porter 2021; see also Barber and Wilson-Hartgrove n.d.).

Unreflective support for any single political party cannot count as theological literacy. This is the world for which seminaries in North America must train bold voices for God’s good work. Deep familiarity with our Christian biblical and ecclesial traditions, coupled with ways to express that familiarity inside our church families, cannot be the only or even primary goal for our programs. At ADC, our mission is “to equip Christians to serve the mission of God in church *and world* with transformative impact” (*emphasis added*, ADC 2026). To fulfill that mission faithfully, we must be concerned not simply with the cross-shaped vertical relationship between God and individuals but also those cross-shaped horizontal relationships among individuals in community.

We must support our students not only to disciple followers of Christ within their churches but also to embody Christ, and empower others to embody Christ, within their local neighborhoods. This task is the most important one theological educators face today, whether we teach core programs or offer traditional continuing education opportunities or facilitate anything in between: the task of forming beloved communities. And we have no small task set before us. How do we help students connect biblical interpretation to public crises? Theology to community development? History and practical ministry skills to neighborhood needs? All efforts across theological education must point toward the ongoing growth of leaders for church, academy, *and* society who are critically reflective and flexible. Theological literacy, in this view, encompasses a lifelong journey of honing skills for theological reflection and action in church and world. Most importantly, it requires

not simply accomplishment of key, static content but rather formation into a holistic, dynamic posture of *phronesis* (practical wisdom). If ever our idea as theological educators was to graduate “sages” who know most of what they need to know for lives of ministerial service, that idea will not work now.

Cultivating Lifelong Learner-Practitioners Through Heutagogy

The future of work across all industries will require less specific content and more skills with built-in mechanisms for adaptability, including skills in global citizenship and creativity (Kim 2022; World Economic Forum 2023; see also chapter by Andreolli-Comstock in this volume). Churches and schools are welcoming ever more diverse populations, and students are expressing a desire for more flexibility and personalization in education. Students need to be prepared for real-world impact in a rapidly-changing world with evolving job markets and bivocational ministry models (Futuring Hub for Theo-Futures Research 2023; Gin, Deasy, and Peña-Camprubí 2025; Stephens 2022). In view of these trends, theological literacy cannot be static.

Theological literacy also does not have to be a moving target. Theological educators must imagine their programs as pieces of ongoing formation for diverse ministerial leaders who can access content easily but who must nurture lifelong muscles for utilizing that content well. If we drill down on the capabilities we cultivate, if we aim to form “lifelong learner-practitioners” who are thoughtful and nimble wherever they serve, our theological education efforts will have a much longer shelf life and ongoing deeper impact. However, the challenge for any seminary faculty—mostly composed of specialists in traditional disciplines like Christian history, biblical interpretation, and theology—is to utilize their content expertise not to reproduce content experts but to shape adaptive leaders.

Enter my new favorite concept: heutagogy.² Heutagogy connotes the word “heuristic,” meaning to inquire and learn something for oneself (Parslow 2010). The most amenable strategies for shaping students who will succeed in the future are those that are student-driven, inclusive, problem-based, collaborative, and lifelong (Kim 2022; World Economic Forum 2023). And they must emphasize learning how to learn (Gatopoulos 2025). Heutagogy, or self-determined learning (Blaschke

2023), is exactly this type of learning strategy. It emphasizes student agency for diverse students, a nonlinear “choose your own adventure” method connected with real-world environments and challenges, collaboration skills, and self-reflection on learning. Heutagogical approaches are democratic, not advocating a “correct” understanding of disciplinary content but a “correct” approach to it: no learner is inferior to another, and all learners must not be docile (Msila 2014, 217). Heutagogy shapes students with lifelong capacities to leverage learning in new contexts. Students who become heutagogical learners can reflect and lead change wherever they find themselves:

Instead of passively receiving information, heutagogical learners engage in self-directed exploration and problem-solving.... Complete consciousness occurs when an individual transforms themselves into a lifelong learner by utilizing knowledge as a product for changing who they are and their surrounding society (Reisdorfer et al. 2024, 597 and 600).

Heutagogy meets learners where they are, invites them to bring their contexts to the learning, and encourages them to explore their interests toward constructive applications in neighborhoods they serve. In the case of theological education, heutagogical approaches form students as public theologians. Heutagogy nurtures theological literacy in robust ways that connect well with the public square. Heutagogical learners develop the facility to connect Christian traditions with public circumstances in faithful, adaptive ways. These students shape lifelong muscles not only to disciple congregations inside church walls but also to embody prophetic voices in broader communities.

How does such a learning strategy compare with more well-known approaches, or other “gogies,” such as pedagogy and andragogy? Pedagogy, often synonymous with learning for children but not limited to that age group, can be quite helpful for students with little academic or practical knowledge of a topic (Stoten 2022). Pedagogy helps students gain the basic building blocks for later work via courses that emphasize the disciplinary canons, guide students through some logical linear sequence of those canons, contain a significant number of lectures, and assess for acquisition of knowledge. Andragogy, often synonymous with adult learning, and heutagogy both invite learners to take more control of their learning. These approaches may work best with students who already have some academic or practical knowledge of a topic (Stoten 2022). Teachers utilizing andragogy or heutagogy in the

classroom provide guidance and resources while allowing students some choice in how they will navigate their learning journeys.

The key difference between andragogy and heutagogy is the extra layer of self-awareness nurtured in heutagogical learners (Table 1). Heutagogical approaches afford the most control to students, inviting them to co-design learning outcomes, syllabi, activities, and assessments with their teachers (Blaschke 2012, 2021, 2023). Most importantly, heutagogy involves self-reflection on the process of learning and subsequent utilization of that same process for similar or different results as needed in new contexts. In andragogy, students develop *competency*, or “proven ability in acquiring knowledge and skills” (Blaschke 2012, 59). Students can retrieve knowledge and repeat skills. But in heutagogy, students develop *capability*; they are not only competent in knowledge and skills, but they also can adapt that information for unfamiliar situations. This approach can work for all age levels. For example, heutagogy resonates with the child-centered Montessori method of education, emphasizing discovery and reflection, creation of new content, and collaboration with others.

Table 1
Differences Between Pedagogy, Andragogy, and Heutagogy

PEDAGOGY	ANDRAGOGY	HEUTAGOGY
teacher-directed	self-directed	self-determined
role of instructor: “sage on the stage”	role of instructor: “guide on the side”	role of instructor: “partner in the process”
Focus on disciplinary content . Courses support knowledge transfer and acquisition .	Focus on disciplinary content . Courses support competency development , or demonstration of specific knowledge and skills.	Focus on processes of learning . Courses support capability development , or preparation for leveraging specific knowledge and skills in new contexts.
Courses comprise goals, objectives, and activities along a linear path .	Courses follow a general linear structure but allow flexibility for learners to direct or organize their own learning.	Courses are non-linear and allow learners to decide what and how they will learn.

Adapted from Blaschke (2023, 247–52).

In theological education, heutagogical approaches can emphasize self-reflection by centering—either in individual disciplinary courses or through transdisciplinary experiential and capstone courses—the cycle of action and reflection that undergirds pastoral praxis. Students should graduate from a master’s-level program not only with knowledge of hermeneutics, theology, and practical ministry skills but also with mastery of the tool that organizes all that knowledge into ongoing, iterative cycles of reflective work: the pastoral cycle (or spiral). In my view, theological literacy comprises capability with the pastoral cycle. In the pastoral cycle, leaders try faithful actions; reflect on them considering context, scripture, and traditions; and imagine next faithful actions in a continuously repeating loop of reflective action (Bevans 2002, 70–87; Porter 2025, 84). The cycle forms the core of prophetic public theology. It brings scripture and traditions into conversation with real-time concerns; it involves an ongoing *phronetic* (practically wise) posture for ministry, one that students nurture through accredited programs and lifelong learning. Siloed disciplinary approaches, or newly-emerging competency-based approaches, leave out this important organizing core, this capability with the tool of the pastoral cycle. We do so to our peril. Theological literacy that emphasizes this cycle constitutes the seminarian ready to relate well and innovate creatively in a fluid global community.

Learning Portfolios and the Two AIs

Faculty already busy with full loads of teaching, research, and service may find it overwhelming to feel as though they need to revise their work to respond to any number of emerging trends with congregations or in education. Further, even if we encourage faculty simply to focus on heutagogy as a key for nurturing future-ready seminarians, the task may seem out of reach. Seminaries teach in complex modalities and configurations, including both synchronous (live) elements and asynchronous (on your own time) elements; hyflex mode, with live sessions that include students in-person and online simultaneously; and, sometimes, combining students at different program levels (bachelor’s, master’s) in the same class. These multiple dynamics are complicated enough without stressing over which “gogy” to use for a course or portion of a course. How might we simplify the task of cultivating theological literacy in our complex times?

At ADC, we are imagining how to orient courses, our Mentored Ministry program, whole degrees, and micro-credentials around a learning portfolio. Akin to a portfolio a student might compile to enter graduate school, or a PK-12 teacher might curate during their own learning journey, or an artist might design to garner commissions, a ministry portfolio includes any learning artifacts students want to take with them into their future ministries. Even in the “non-practical” disciplines, students can generate research findings, create works (like art, poetry, or digital media), and write reflections that connect the subject to their personal passions and concrete hopes for the world. They can design their own projects to explore theological disciplines in ways that are meaningful to them and develop their lifelong learner-practitioner skills. Students can set their learning goals, methods, and assessment criteria in consultation with their instructors. Most importantly, the portfolio includes self-reflections on the processes of creating those artifacts, connecting learning with the pastoral cycle.

Through a learning portfolio model, students imagine how to take their studies into future ministries from the moment they begin those studies. The portfolio serves as a resource for recognizing prior learning and informing the denominational ordination process as well, identifying strengths students already have practiced and strengths they plan to develop further. The focus of student learning and praxis is that thread of theological literacy, centered on capability with the pastoral cycle. Students leverage the resources of their own ministry contexts, core programs, and lifelong learning opportunities to continue building their portfolios. They develop that *phronetic* posture that inspires them to add to their portfolios throughout their journeys, whether through their work, further education, or communities of practice with peers.

But how could faculty possibly support *every* student (or even small groups of students) to create their own *unique* journey through theological education?³ Here enter two of my favorite tools, which I call “the two AIs” (Porter 2024): Indigenous Appreciative Inquiry (IAI)⁴ and generative artificial intelligence (AI).⁵ IAI is a process that invites faculty and students to explore topics in partnership with each other. It offers a conversationally focused, asset-based, open-ended way to identify a topic that a class or a small group wants to explore. Faculty can begin each term with an IAI conversation that welcomes a class to discern the theme or challenge they want to explore together within the parameters of the course’s discipline. Or faculty can collaborate to offer one-off seminars or transdisciplinary courses on topics that

students self-identify through IAI. Because IAI is an ancient practice of listening to diverse voices and advancing community concerns positively and collaboratively, it constitutes not only a heutagogical device for classroom purposes but also a process students can use in their work when they graduate. IAI is a *phronetic* framework for global citizenship, innovation, and faithful change. Inviting students to practice IAI both maximizes their educational journeys and prepares them with an essential tool for ministry.

The second tool is AI, which ADC utilizes for faculty efficiencies and personalization of student learning. In 2024, we designed a tailored version of ChatGPT trained on ADC's identity and mission, MDiv program objectives, a syllabus template, and frameworks for learning outcomes and grading. Faculty utilize this "ADC Course Content Creator" to review current syllabi, draft new syllabi, brainstorm class activities, and shape assessments. In one of our first AI experiments, we used the Content Creator to design *and deliver* an entire master's-level course on the ethics of AI in Christian ministry, with the support of additional AI tools that create avatars and videos (Faith and Leadership 2024; Cuthbertson 2025; Robbins 2025). We are piloting another version of the tool, "ADC FuturesGPT," that translates our Pathways grant research on current trends into practical classroom implications. We also are experimenting with a customizable chatbot for students to practice their counseling skills or have conversations with historical figures such as Martin Luther (Cuthbertson 2025; Robbins 2025). Faculty can leverage any of these tools to tailor courses instantly—even for individual students or small groups.

ADC is a leading voice in theological education for determining the possibilities, limits, and ethical implications of AI tools amidst the quickly evolving field of generative AI resources (Saleem et al. 2024; Mollick and Mollick 2024) as well as heutagogical approaches with those tools. We believe AI tools will not diminish the theological literacy of our students but rather support their development of it. Instead of shying away from resources our students soon will know well anyway, we are shaping proactively the kinds of tools that best facilitate theological literacy. AI helps us serve more diverse students well, from diverse contexts, headed to diverse ministries, than we could do without AI—because AI helps us lean into individualized, reflective approaches for our growing student body. Ultimately, our students could use tools like these to develop their own personalized lifelong learning journeys. Meanwhile, as with the tool of IAI, facility with AI will serve students well not only in the classroom but also in

the congregation. If we help students leverage AI tools with *phronetic* wisdom, through the lens of the pastoral cycle, they will help their congregants and neighborhoods do the same.

Conclusion

The way to “future-proof” theological curricula for core degrees and lifelong learning must involve more intentional focus on theological literacy, interpreted as a capability to function as a prophetic, adaptive leader for changing contexts. In a season when theological schools may not recognize many purported expressions of Christianity, theological educators must shape public theologians with the wherewithal to embody Christ in ways that nurture beloved community. We cannot change our content fast enough to keep pace with emerging trends and educational research, but we can focus our courses on learning portfolios that emphasize the pastoral cycle and develop lifelong learner-practitioners. A heutagogical learning strategy that maximizes tools both old and new, IAI and AI, can equip students for faithful leadership amidst the cacophony of voices in the public square. The viability and vitality of theological education in all our schools, and beyond those walls, depends on it.

Questions for reflection

- How does your school interpret theological literacy? How does that understanding of theological literacy serve as a through line for your core degrees and lifelong learning programs? Or how might it do so?
- Reflect on the “gogies” you use in your classroom and how they might help (or hinder) development of theological literacy. How might you connect the disciplinary content you usually teach more directly with the pastoral cycle? How might your school leverage the learning portfolio model to cultivate theological literacy?
- How does your school utilize tools such as IAI and AI? What are the limitations of these tools in your context? What are the possibilities they might afford as you cultivate theological literacy?

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Notes

- 1 Gavin D’Costa’s distinction between “public theology” and “public theologies” informs these definitions (2005).
- 2 Here I acknowledge my debt to Shari Russell, former Director of NAIITS: An Indigenous Learning Community, who introduced me to the concept (conversation with author, November 20, 2023).
- 3 For more on heutagogy in higher and theological education, see Moore (2020); Martinez and Muñoz (2021); Lock et al. (2021); and Hukkinen, Lütz, and Dowden (2023). For additional heutagogical learning ideas and methods, see Martin (2021) and Doyle (2023).
- 4 Acadia Divinity College is learning about the IAI process from NAIITS: An Indigenous Learning Community in sessions led by Terry LeBlanc, Matt LeBlanc, Mike Hogeterp, and Nichole Forbes. See more about NAIITS at <https://naiits.com>. See also Porter (2026).
- 5 I utilized ChatGPT to support my writing process for this chapter. It drafted an initial abstract in response to prompts that contained my specific ideas and goals, and it drafted a final abstract upon reviewing my completed chapter. It sparked the phrases “lifelong learner-practitioner” and “partner in the process.” It also helped inspire my ideas about the learning portfolio. I am finding that it cannot anticipate the original contributions I want to make nor write in my voice, but it can help organize my thoughts efficiently and suggest phrasing at key junctures.

The Leadership Institute for Growth, Healing, and Transformation as an Ecotone Case Study

KATHARINE E. LASSITER

Lifelong learning programs in theological education form an ecotone surrounded by many ecosystems: church, world, and academy. Ecotones are fascinating places, reflecting the tensions, porosity, and edges between systems that remake the very landscape that surrounds it. They are places without distinct boundaries and populated with adaptive creatures who can make a home in between worlds. Regions of high biodiversity, buffer zones that absorb pollutants, and nesting locations for animals—ecotones are critical for planetary flourishing.

In this chapter, I offer the Leadership Institute for Growth, Healing, and Transformation (LIGHT) as a case study to situate lifelong learning in one institutional context, to explore the unique features of a multifaith liberal religious ecotone, and to offer a map to others by reflecting on challenges, opportunities, and possibilities. I resist telling a linear story or offering a checklist. Instead, I reflect on the relationship between my particular ecotone and ecosystems as lifelong learning programs must be authentic to a particular context and occasion. Through this case study, I show how authenticity and

formational theological education are evidenced through three prisms: faith orientation, design principles, and learning needs. In my context, these prisms take the form of a non-creedal standpoint, a practical theological lens, and a hunger for spiritual belonging and meaning. I invite others to identify the faith orientation, the design principles, and the needs, wants, and desires of their own contexts.

Lifelong Learning Between the Times

Successful institution building—small and large—requires guiding theories and methods in addition to practical skills and personal dispositions. Visioning, strategic planning, human and financial resource management, cross-institutional-organizing, and communication are necessary skills, as is high frustration tolerance, capacity for emergent possibilities tempered by realism, and a cheerful and faithful disposition. Methodologically, institution-building, like ministry, is iterative work guided by a praxis cycle in which theology is in dialogue with practice. Further, it is deeply contextual work that requires an understanding of the landscapes in which our ecosystems are situated and the pressures theological education faces. Ted A. Smith’s analysis of the affordance of authenticity and Daniel O. Aleshire’s analysis of formational theological education are two key ideas that ground my case study.

In *The End of Theological Education*, Smith gives an account of the changes in theological education in the United States from the colonial period to present day. Smith suggests that theological education be attentive to certain affordances, “a set of concrete, historically contingent, morally ambivalent forms that can make possible a range of actions” (2023, 169). Affordances are not predetermined ends, but conditions in which subjects may “act in a world already illumined by the *telos*”; they can “take the shape of love” (Smith 2023, 170). To name an affordance involves seeing through “the light of redemption” which holds both “grace and judgment” (Smith 2023, 170). Smith identifies several affordances but gives special attention to authenticity. He asks us to consider what theological education would look like if it invited learners to give rich theological accounts of a self embedded in webs of relationality, including with their understanding of the sacred. Genealogies of self, history, ethics, and theology would be attentive to power and knowledge in such a way that contingency in the making

and unmaking is revealed, that we come to know how we came to be in the situation that meets us, and the work of redemption might be discerned (Smith 2023, 180–81).

Aleshire invites theological institutions toward formational theological education. Aleshire argues that formational theological education ought to shape and orient souls in a *habitus* or socially structured sets of norms and practices (Aleshire 2021, 82). Formational theological education ought to be affective, behavioral, and intellectual, and oriented toward “a wisdom of God and the ways of God” (Aleshire 2021, 82). It is evidenced by “spiritual and moral maturity, relational integrity, knowledge of Scripture and tradition, and the capacity to exercise religious leadership” (Aleshire 2021, 82). Eschewing quick fixes, Aleshire writes that this kind of education requires reflection on the vocation of the school and the fortification of faculty faithfulness (Aleshire 2021, 112–17). Only then can specific educational practices such as student evaluation, theological integration across the disciplines, and partnership development be impactful (Aleshire 2021, 132–35). He argues that teaching and learning attentive to formation necessitates asking a different set of questions: not just will a sermon preach, but how does the practice of preaching—interpreting sacred writings, preparing and delivering spoken word, evaluating hearer’s reception to the spoken word—shape the preacher’s faith life (Aleshire 2021, 124)? Formation for ministry is more than professional excellence and ministerial outputs. Formation for ministry requires receptivity and an unfolding.

The affordance of authenticity and the goal of formational theological education point toward hopes contained within LIGHT. In building LIGHT, I asked how lifelong learning programs might inflame learners with the desire for knowledge of self, others, and the s/Sacred in ways resonant with the language, practices, and traditions of my context. Smith and Aleshire offer theoretical grounding to my reflections of what it can look like to build lifelong learning programs where authenticity and formation, being and becoming, are formalized.

A Non-Creedal Faith Environment

In January 2022, I began the work of building LIGHT with a projected launch date of Fall 2022. This audacious timeline vividly reflects the discrepancies between Aleshire’s call for reflection on the vocation

of theological education and pressures felt by administrators and governance boards. Baseline research and a conceptual paper provided initial orientation. Still, I needed more time: time for contextual research with alums, current students, professional groups, and denominational partners; time to build relationships, build trust, and build a research plan; time to listen; time to reorder and realign what already existed. The value of time cannot be addressed by creating a new position or hiring a savvy builder. Yet, I fear that too many of our institutions and partners operate in a manner antithetical to the gift of time.

My colleagues shared a short concept paper with a four-fold rationale for adding lifelong learning programs. First, they identified the growing trends in adult lifelong learning and noted continuing education requirements of Unitarian Universalist clergy as well as mainline clergy. As well, they suggested that a leadership institute focused on healing, justice, and liberation, with commitments to racial and social justice would align with the mission of the school and the plan for a doctoral program in social justice leadership. Second, they suggested that engaging with alums and clergy outside of degree programs would create a significant new revenue stream and support the school's continuing independence. Third, they recognized that the institution had limited name recognition and that lifelong learning was an opportunity to share the vision and richness of our learning community. Fourth, they argued that lifelong learning opportunities were needed to engage donors and alums.

However, the concept paper quickly took on a life on its own, and the voices of my institutional colleagues became muted. The paper described various audiences, offerings, and structures. It argued that the institute would serve students enrolled in credit-bearing programs by offering co-curricular opportunities for training. It identified social justice leadership as a key activity—specifically the work of training clergy, activists, organizers, and intellectuals through certificates in non-violent direct action, community organizing, and legislative advocacy. It noted continuing education needs in administration, finance, board development, and fundraising as well as theology, digital competency, and spiritual direction. Additionally, a pre-existing center focused on religious education and faith formation would be incorporated into the work of the leadership institute. In short, I was handed a conceptual hodge podge that could not be fully operationalized.

This concept paper reflects the challenging terrain faced by many lifelong learning professionals: a kitchen sink of ideas without sufficient evidence to inform decision-making; lack of institutional focus reflecting confusion on niche and desire; and unrealistic expectations that easily confuse professional competency and saviorism. To build an institute with the capacity to support all these ideas would eclipse the credit-bearing degree programs and require huge sources of start-up capital from multimillion dollar grants or endowed funds. None of these possibilities were present, and, even if they were, it would be irresponsible from a sustainability lens to venture too far down the “we can be everything for everybody” path. Thus, my first task was to understand the surrounding ecosystems and help my collaborators to understand them, as well. My second important task was to understand through conversation and deep listening the hopes and loves that were animated and codified through the writing of the concept paper. Third, my task was to hypothesize, test, and iterate, again and again.

I needed to know the particular niche of my ecotone, particularly what it meant to design for and from a non-creedal, Unitarian Universalist context, and which of the many visions would orient the institute toward the embodied work of justice and healing. I gathered alums, current students, staff, faculty, membership organizations for various religious professionals, denominational leaders, and our executive leadership team to understand the ecosystems and the edges that make up the ecotone. Through one-on-one conversations, focus groups, and a survey, we identified four key take-aways. First, identifying new revenue streams was important for long-term institutional sustainability. Second, clergy and other religious professionals were experiencing burn-out and vocational malaise after years of pandemic-responsive ministry, vitriolic politics, and social change activism amidst climate disasters. Third, opportunities for formation in community were as important as skill-building to support and renew ministerial practice as well as tend to vocational call. Fourth, alums, clergy, and other religious professionals were committed to lifelong learning and had earmarked professional and/or personal funds for their own spiritual and ministerial development and growth. Overall, our stakeholders were adamant that they needed nutrients for spiritual replenishment and future growth.

After gathering this data, I convened a small advisory group reflective of the diversity of Unitarian Universalism, the theological school, and those I hoped we would serve: ordained and lay; theists

and humanists; diverse in race, gender, sexual orientation, and ability; and with ministries in both congregation and community reflective of urban and rural communities, working class and well-to-do. In other words, I used intersectionality as a critical practice drawing from the work of Patricia Hill Collins, who drew a link between intersectionality, epistemology, power, and resistance (Collins 2019, 122). Epistemic resistance, or resistance knowledge projects, are vital to challenge operating power/knowledge regimes, such as religious ethnonationalism, particularly those that would mark out for containment or punishment the kinds of bodies and communities that find a home inside a/religious, multireligious, and humanistic spaces such as Meadville Lombard. Gathering stakeholders is a critical administrative practice. It can either reify an exclusionary version of theological education or recognize myriad calls in service to the sacred. Who we gather matters as we build new programs.

Working together, our diverse advisory board outlined an adaptive strategy for research and design attentive to affordability and length of engagement. Adaptive strategy focuses on ongoing reality-testing and decision-making. Rather than a singular fixed route, adaptive strategy relies on identification of a goal or destination but an openness to the route. For this reason, we did not start with crafting a mission and vision. Instead, we asked learners what they needed, wanted, and desired, what kept them from accessing what they named, and how they assessed the value of what they named.

The advisory group heard the importance of having several price points available. We began to use the shorthand of “postcard-print-original” to think about how to offer a quality item differentiated by size and price point. A postcard edition might be a one-hour free webinar or a three-hour workshop priced at \$50. A print edition might be a six-week short course priced at \$300. An original might be a year-long certification or cohort priced at \$1000. These various price points and lengths of engagement strengthen our ecotone by increasing access and diversifying learners.

The advisory group also listened very carefully to the named desire for both personal and social transformation, as well as to what we did not hear: particular doctrinal claims drawn from one religious tradition. Stakeholders drew from Unitarian Universalist theology, Christian theology, humanism, and more, reflecting the non-creedal, multi-faith ecotone. They implicitly articulated a theory of change that personal and social transformation are inextricably linked. In other words, an institute focused on justice and social

activism required opportunities for healing and spiritual growth for the sake of leadership development. The mission and vision of LIGHT (Meadville Lombard Theological School n.d.) reflect this implicit theory of change:

The Leadership Institute for Growth, Healing, and Transformation (LIGHT) at Meadville Lombard Theological School equips communities and leaders with tools for personal and social transformation. Rooted in our heritage as Unitarian Universalists, the Institute:

- Centers personal and communal growth and healing, supports the dismantling of oppressive systems, and the transformation of society, and enriches theological imagination through non-degree bearing lifelong learning, including certificates, micro-credentials, trainings, and workshops on a broad range of topics.
- Equips lay and ordained religious leaders with the practical know-how and know-what for life-giving ministry.
- Designs transformative educational experiences for vocational and spiritual growth using a lens of justice, inclusion, and belonging.
- Builds a strong community of lifelong learners who share the same commitments.

These words my colleagues and I put to paper reflect the people and process of our unique ecotone and our adaptive strategy.

By the time we tested this mission and vision with the communities we serve, it was already apparent that our first year of programming would focus on learning for personal and social transformation and offer several engagement lengths. In August 2022, eight months after work began, we launched a two-year formation and certification program in spiritual direction, partnering with a long-time Unitarian Universalist spiritual director. Tandi Rogers had been designing her own training program for several years and was eager to offer the formation and certification program in a seminary context. We cast a vision of training 150 Unitarian Universalists over a decade to serve as spiritual innovators grounded in diverse traditions and equipped for the ministry of spiritual accompaniment. Additionally, we partnered with the Unitarian Universalist Association to support an ongoing conversation on becoming a post-imperial faith. We designed and offered a three-day online conference in October 2022 where over 80 participants learned and discussed how to repair harm wrought by extractive capitalism, structural racism, and patriarchal faith. In

March 2023, we built on the momentum of the conference and offered a six-week course on the practice of post-imperial ministry.

Practical Theological Lens

At LIGHT, we are oriented toward individual and community transformation—being and becoming. This orientation guides how we approach our work. At the same time, centering, equipping, designing, and building are the everyday practical theological activities that instructors, my staff, and I do regularly. There are four distinct audiences and activities that comprise practical theology: It is a method, a discipline in itself, an area in theological education comprised of subdisciplines, and an activity of meaning-making practiced in community—“a normative project guided by the desire to make some difference in the world” (Miller-McLemore 2012, 106). At LIGHT, we use a practical theological lens to design, instruct, and assess curriculum that teaches practices of ministry that aim toward healing and justice.

The method of learning should match the aims of education. As growth, healing, and transformation are our aim, educational justice is our method. Educational justice theorizes that liberal democracy is best served by an educated public and that public education is a common good that must be supported through legislative policies and educational practices that address persistent inequalities. Thus, educational justice demands that lifelong learning directors think critically about barriers to access, what counts as theological education, and who is a teacher and who is a learner.

One ecosystem that surrounds LIGHT is Unitarian Universalism, a non-creedal faith committed to justice, equity, and compassion. Faith values are reflected through seven principles emphasizing human dignity, peace and justice, interdependence, democratic process, and religious freedom. In 2020, the Unitarian Universalist Association’s Commission on Institutional Change issued a report challenging Unitarian Universalism to deepen its anti-racism commitments and advance a more inclusive multiculturalism in both theology and practice (Unitarian Universalist Association 2020). A study/action guide provided a structure for examination and implementation, lifting up practices such as governance, hospitality and inclusion, education for liberation, and restoration/reparations for congregational examination.

The Commission's report provided language and rationale that supported LIGHT's practical theological orientation and educational justice design method. As an inclusive program, LIGHT offers non-credit bearing, academically rigorous, spiritually grounded education and formation for clergy, religious professionals, lay leaders, and anyone else who might be drawn to the content and the community. Online delivery of workshops, courses, and certificates are critical for ensuring learner access, especially as there are only two Unitarian Universalist seminaries in the United States. As a hospitable program, instructors develop online courses, workshops, and certificates with a blend of synchronous and asynchronous learning in conversation with peers. As a restorative program, every learner and instructor has continued access to a robust learning platform for up to three years from the time of last engagement. In moving toward restoration, we foster a sense of community and belonging, increase resource sharing and networking, and create spaces for spiritual succor. We hope that aiming toward healing, growth, and transformation by designing for justice and teaching to and from practices of ministry makes some difference in the world.

Hunger for Spiritual Belonging and Meaning

Data from the Association of Theological Schools (ATS) shows a gap between what ministers need in their work and what they learn in seminary. In a 2020 study, ATS alums consistently ranked administration, leadership, and finance in their top five critical learning gaps, even when the data was parsed by ministry context, degree type, race/ethnicity, gender, and ecclesial family (ATS 2020). In another study, analysis of the 2022 ATS Alums/Mapping the Workforce survey showed that 51% of alums report that spiritual disciplines is a primary competency and suggests curricular gaps (Gin, Deasy, & Peña-Camprubí 2025, 166). This rich data and analyses are important descriptors of a surrounding ecosystem.

In Fall 2024, we partnered with an external organization to conduct market research about our ecotone. We hoped to better understand our learners and the competencies they need for their ministry. The data was illuminating. First, the survey was well received by alums and friends of Meadville Lombard (n=902) and showed that our audience was largely Unitarian Universalist. Second, we learned that the

respondents hungered for education and formation on topics of organizational management, spiritual development, and *change management*, a term inclusive of anti-racism/anti-oppression work, community organizing and advocacy, and inclusive and accessible programming. Last, most respondents (87%) were primarily interested in online delivery formats with diminishing openness to multiplatform and in-person opportunities in their city or region. The survey data was reassuring; it confirmed that what we had built so far by attending to faith context, design principles, and learning needs was reasonably accurate and aligned. Additionally, further conversation provided a rationale for the why of our work.

One-on-one conversations with LIGHT learners revealed a deep hunger for spiritual meaning and belonging. For example, Unitarian Universalists seeking administrative skill development—think budgeting and forecasting—have many options. Lifelong learners stated that they chose to study through LIGHT because of our stated values. They explained that instructors teach a set of skills while fostering belonging in a spiritual community. In this community it is understood that budgets are moral documents. Forecasting is about faithfulness, not just the bottom line.

Unitarian Universalism is uniquely situated to speak to and from the desire for spiritual meaning and belonging, given its non-creedal standpoint and multifaith orientation. Unitarian Universalism is known as a chosen faith, not one of infant baptism or adult conversion. Many who have experienced religious trauma find a home in a faith that welcomes diversity and multiplicity. Thus, making spiritual meaning and finding belonging are key activities of lifelong learning that far exceed identification of content needs or resourcing expertise. Instead, they require discernment in developing programs.

Speaking to the desire for meaning and belonging necessarily excludes some kinds of programming content. For example, a course focused on Hebrew or Christian scriptures divorced from a history of interpretation or its use by clergy or other religious professionals is not appropriate. Conversely, a course focused on preaching liberation that teaches clergy how to interpret and make use of sacred writings for grounding a community in justice activities is appropriate. So too, fostering spiritual meaning and belonging excludes commodification of spiritual technologies both ancient and new divorced from the communities of practice. Instead, teaching theological, spiritual, and ministerial practices contextually and in community while keeping an eye to how this work develops authentic selves is appropriate.

LIGHT programming attempts to find alignment between learners' hunger for spiritual meaning and belonging while also equipping them with robust skills and ways of thinking theologically. The two-year program in Spiritual Direction draws from and nurtures the wisdom of one-on-one relationships where holy listening invites self-development rooted in a community of care. Spiritual direction forms directors to move more deeply into their own authenticity through communal formations for spiritual maturity, hospitality, and liberation. A one-year program in Authentic Leadership and Public Intimacy accompanies those in the public eye who share some aspects of themselves with others, whether in writing, public speaking, or other embodied forms such as acting and dancing. Leadership development is rooted in spiritual formation. Even the certificate in Non-profit Management for Religious Professionals and Faith-based Leaders makes space for leaders to develop an administrative style that is both competent and authentic, aided by the opportunity to consult one-on-one with a human resources professional on projects and personal learning gaps. The faith formation program Beloved Conversations facilitates a curriculum that centers racial identity development as integral to spiritual development and invites forward movement from white fragility toward solidarity, justice, and reparation. The programming and its design speak to other hopes, as well: a place for friendship, a place for remembering, a place for spark and light.

Conclusion

Both authenticity and formation are difficult to teach, but their absence is easy to sense. In describing how the Leadership Institute for Growth, Healing, and Transformation became real, I hope this case study embodies that same spirit of lifelong learning that is found in LIGHT. I have drawn on the metaphor of ecotone and ecosystem to argue for three lenses that, when put one on top of other, bring into focus my ecotone: a non-creedal stance that invites a community to create theology together; a practical theological lens that situates and adapts practices of ministry and practices of faith in context; and specific content that responds and shapes the spiritual hunger for meaning and belonging. In sharing about the faith context, theological orientation, and learning needs, I also reflected on how we created an institute

from the ground up by utilizing an adaptive strategy, foregrounding educational justice, and practicing discernment.

While I have shared many details relevant to those who are considering new programs or revamping old programs, I have not shared as many as I could. Many other matters are important, such as registration and billing, communications and marketing, budgeting and revenue generation expectations, the role of tenured and tenure-track faculty, and the difference between co-curricular programming and non-credit bearing courses and programs of study. Attention to each of these matters is dependent on the larger ecosystems that surround the ecotone and provide parameters to orient future development. It is my sincere hope that this case study encourages my colleagues in lifelong learning and their executive leaders to think about how their institutions might set a steady pace for transforming theological education toward greater accompaniment of leaders already in our midst and who long for something far more than a job—a vocation that brings them home to themselves and to their deepest desires to know and to be known.

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Storytelling

The Twilight Between the One and the All

*La Memoria es la raíz de la sabiduría
(Memory is the root of wisdom).*

DORIS GARCÍA-RIVERA

Let me tell you a story.

In a time when there was no time, it was the time of the beginning. Neither night nor day. It was a twilight where Time was motionless, going nowhere and coming from nowhere. This was the time when the greatest gods lived, those who gave birth to the world, the first ones. These gods were seven, and each one was two. They were small and didn't know much. But they did talk and talk a lot! They were pure chatter, talking at the same time without understanding one another at all. But—who knows how or why—there came a moment when they all fell silent at the same time! Then one of them spoke and said that it was good that when one spoke, the others should not speak, so that the one who spoke could be heard and the others who were not speaking could hear him. The seven, who are two in one, agreed to speak in turns. And the oldest of our elders say that this was the first agreement in history: to not only speak but also to listen. The gods looked at the corners of that dawn without day or night, without world, persons, animals, or things. They realized that all the little bits of that *twilight* spoke truths and that one person alone could

not hear all the *whispers*. So, they divided the work of listening to the dawn and thus were able to learn everything that the world of that time, not yet a world, had to teach them. Then the world took shape. And so, the first gods saw that One is necessary. It is necessary for One to learn and to work and to live and to love. But they also saw that One is not enough. They saw that All are needed and only All are sufficient to set the world in motion. And so it was that the first gods, the greatest gods, those who were born in the world, *became wise* knowing how to speak and listen. Not because they knew many things or because they knew a lot about one thing—they were wise—but because *they understood that ‘the One and the All are necessary and sufficient.’* (Marcos 1998, author’s translation)

Like the annoying and senseless babbling of the seven gods, we perceive the world as noisy and chaotic. The shift in global leadership and geopolitical changes, the rollback of rights and rising authoritarianism, growing economic and health disparities, crises in education, rising misinformation, and massive population displacement, among others, have profoundly altered national and global priorities. The way we engage our world has changed as well as the way we teach, learn, and do ministry. Given these paradigmatic changes, Western societies have steadily moved away from collectivism, embeddedness, nature, justice, and history, toward an “egosystemic absoluteness” of technologically hyper-stimulated juvenile individualism searching for pleasure (Pietropaoli 2023, 5 and 15). These “piercing and chaotic” tendencies affect local religious life in the United States and Canada. They are shaped by lack of empathy, inability to cooperate, the sense of entitlement and superiority, and the feelings of disconnection and loneliness that many ministers and religious leaders recognize. These human scarcities fuel most of the sociopolitical division, fearing and hate of differences, and cultural wars we experience.

New generations of theology learners—older, bivocational, knowledgeable of the world and the church—who work in these challenging contexts question the value of traditional degrees, and seek shorter, more flexible and ministry-relevant options. Being more self-directed, drawing knowledge from their accumulated experience, focusing on problems rather than subjects, and feeling the need to understand the reasons for their learnings (Olivares-Cuhat 2022, 135), adult learners modified the professional model of theological education into a model that emphasizes “human” formation (Aleshire 2021, 74, 140). The Association of Theological Schools (ATS) recognizes this reality, where

soft and hard competencies must align better to the leadership needs of congregations and theological schools' curricula (Gin et al. 2025, 174) to answer to the challenging and diverse new contexts of ministry.

Students in the recent cohorts I teach are older and bivocational. As with many of my peers, I often see people being absent or late to class or with incomplete assignments due to their "other responsibilities." Recent ATS student data confirm these perceptions with 14.8% of degree-seeking students aged 56 or older aligning with late-career and retirement-age students (The 2024, 1). These companions face not only personal stress, political and cultural divisions and church membership decline but a work reality of attending multiple individuals who are in crisis while balancing their own families and facing frequent personal or job-related criticism and complaints. Beside these personal realities, churches and faith-based organizations push religious leaders to develop ministries attuned to the needs of their associated congregations, groups and communities.

The combination of competencies needed for these different spaces, like preaching or counseling might align well with the curricula of most theological schools. However, other competencies used across institutions in advocacy, poverty alleviation, public witness, and so on, require a diversity of competencies from courting institutional support, conflict transformation, interpersonal skills, project management or digital literacy to self-care and time management. These competencies are seldom taught in the typical curriculum of theological schools and align more with lifelong learning skills (Gin et al. 2025, 166, 171). Theological schools have responded to these new expectations by diversifying programs, targeting new student populations, developing flexible learning models, streamlining operations, revising their governance model, partnering with other organizations, or fine-tuning their lifelong learning spaces. In all these processes, storytelling is a strategic communication mode.

Storytelling is an art and a process where a teller uses a narrative structure and dramatic and mental imagery to weave events in an articulate and sequential manner to communicate with an audience. Stories are "twilights of knowledge" reverberating throughout human experience, the ecotones where knowledge is shared and acquired and transformation is achieved, both at the individual and the collective level. Storytelling and narrative are closely related and share multiple definitions: where narratives are frameworks for stories, storytelling is the process of conveying those stories. Narratives—like myths, legends, folktales, podcasts, case studies, gossip, or even autobiography—heroize

or vilify people, spaces or concepts to identify deep culturally seated values and explain complex rational or irrational issues—how the world functions or who we are. They present the boundaries of accepted behavior or how to resist these limitations. Storytelling is culturally universal and might be considered the original form of knowledge sharing and teaching. The oral communication of any and all stories or narratives configures storytelling (Rocha and Davel 2023, 2).

This chapter is about storytelling. Storytelling in learning-teaching ecosystems is an entry to the wealth of wisdom and knowledge adult learners already hold. Whispering to the impact of changing paradigms in Western societies and theological ecosystems—and to some knowledge theories and learning methods, I discuss the use of narrative pedagogy in learning-teaching spaces, ministry, and management. This chapter is also a story disguised as academic discourse.

Science of Storytelling and Knowledge

More than once my students have expressed their feelings while reading some of the course materials. Beside the usual questions for critical or narrative analysis, I always ask them—How does this reading make you feel? Their responses are broad: some are vague like “gut feeling” or “heavy hearted” while others are specific like “angered” or “confused.” I have also found that when my students interpret and associate these readings to their own lived experiences and contexts, their storytelling develops with a deeper impact for the whole group. In *With Bodies*, Marco Caracciolo and Karin Kukkonen show how narrative understanding is grounded in the “bodies” and “experiential background” of readers (2021, 35). Embodied responses to the act of reading show how our bodies engage the narrative channeling the experience through imagination and affective dynamics. For Caracciolo and Kukkonen, when a person reads a story, the body becomes a “site of conversion . . . between concrete structures of spatial experience and abstract structures of conceptual thought” (2021, 10). An understanding of adult learners as active agents—creators of knowledge, practices, and relationships stimulating analysis, self-direction, and autonomy in the learning process—is one of the gifts of Paulo Freire’s critical pedagogy (2005). When centered in the learner, storytelling becomes at once aesthetic objects assisting people to make sense of the world as well as an embodied battlefield—a central point of struggle

between dominant and subordinate social groups (Freire 2005, 22–23, 100). I have come to understand with the years that *we are stories, living embodied stories*. Our brains are “storytelling brains” that best learn, remember, and form significant emotional bonds through stories.

Theological Education, Ministry, and Storytelling

Where do these contextual whispers and embodied knowledge fit within the theological ecosystem? Even with the mismatches between the traditional pedagogical academic approach, with the unique needs of adult learners and their ministries, academics in the higher education theological ecosystem are increasingly understanding how adults learn and how successful thinking relies on information effectively burned in long-term memory, bodies, and experience.

As a minister who regularly preaches, I find that preaching is an essential skill required in congregations and in some religiously based non-profit organizations. Preaching was the second most reported competency by ATS alums, while communication skills, pastoral care, and counseling were at the top for Latiné alum (Gin et al., 158–59, 165). Ministers see themselves as supporters, advisors, and companions of their congregations and communities, using their communication skills in a diversity of contexts where preaching and counseling have become two of the most important. I found Voelz’s (2019) proposition of the preacher-as-teacher extremely useful and deeply relevant especially as he uses Freire’s concepts to inspire both the minister and the people to self-knowledge, critical thinking, and embodied action. Early in my ministry I learned the value of storytelling. Ministers share narratives that highlight personal and collective struggles and triumphs. We underscore in these narratives the importance of ethical values alongside collective agency, social connection, and mutual support but not always with the communicative framework to be effective in the use of storytelling for sustaining and generating hope.

As more religious institutions develop adult education, story-driven learning cuts through all learning theories as it is a ubiquitous, culturally-flexible, and socially-relevant method aligned with human cognitive and emotional processes. The principles of storytelling combine into the art of dialogue as a shared activity resulting in a transfer of information across our brains, nurturing

effective teaching and learning. A few instructional models and learning methods illustrate storytelling in academic settings.

The *microlearning* framework is ideal to deliver content in small modules. The method uses a short, concise format improving learning and assisting memory encoding (Fountain and Doyle, 2012). If planned with lifelong learning in mind, this method integrates individual factors such as gender, age, and cognitive ability to shape the design and content. Microlearning principles overlap with technology-assisted learning, such as mobile devices, and ubiquitous learning (anytime, anywhere) by using *digital storytelling*, a 2–3-minute-long multimedia tool typically combining audio, images, and video clips to design and originate engaging and interactive narratives. I use digital storytelling as part of a project-based learning course, and while some students struggle with multimedia formats, at the end of the course they also acquire these skills while affirming their organizational and sequential thinking.

Project-Based Learning is a model I have used for years. This model promotes learners to engage in hands-on projects to solve problems or address complex questions, usually engaging in reflective learning, research and team-oriented requiring exploration, critical thinking, and informational synthesis (Žerovnik and Šerbec 2021; Almulla 2020, 3, 12). I have found that Project-Based Learning helps students to integrate not only the learning outcomes into their ministries but their lifelong learning as well. In one of my courses, I ask the students to develop an educational project, usually a short video or presentation (3–5 min) for their congregations, showing how a contemporary popular cultural artifact significant to their ethnic context, history, language, and culture relates to a biblical text of the Torah. I have found that the stories students develop in this model take surprising paths depending on their accumulated knowledge and experience. This model is one of my favorites as it results in the students' effective engagement and skills development while providing a venue to support their congregations in a creative manner.

Personal storytelling is another method for students to share their own stories and experiences, fostering a sense of community and providing diverse interpretations and reflections about *hechos cotidianos* (everyday happenings) (Benavides 2020, 154, 156). I use personal storytelling to welcome the learners in asynchronous courses (“break the ice”) or to establish trust and increase communication. I usually share a very short story about a picture with

deep meaning for me. Beginning with my own life-long learnings, I invite my companions to engage the learning outcomes. I always have several students responding to the story, engaging the conversation, and sharing their own experiences or thoughts on the theme.

A second way I use personal storytelling is when I ask the learners to write a personal story highlighting the learnings they gained by reading about a biblical leader like Moses, Deborah, Jephthah, and others, in relation to their own leadership challenges. I am intentional in including leaders with controversial stories as mirrors to our own humanness. These types of narratives are sacred, treasured windows into the soul of learners (or a community, or people) as well as valuable entries to the wealth of knowledge adults already have, validating their lifelong learning journeys and contributing to our collective growth (Lucas 2023). Sometimes, unplanned personal storytelling happens when I highlight biblical stories while integrating pastoral cases or media news related to the learners' context. It is gratifying to observe the active participation, depth of thoughts, challenging questions, meaningful dialogues on pastoral possibilities, and the diverse cultural meanings learners bring to the discussions.

However, listen to three cautionary words. First, when integrating narratives intentionally geared to enhance dialogue, *counter-storytelling* sometimes comes into the forefront. The initial Zapatista's story describing the gods who were "one always two," where "one person alone" could not hear all the truths, neutralizes and disputes the narrative of individual achievement, the "me alone" myth of success and the "me all knowledgeable scholar" often found in the theological ecosystem. *Counter-storytelling* empowers and gives agency to marginalized communities and challenges dominant narratives that ignore and sustain systemic inequalities. "As individuals reclaim their voices and share their stories of resistance and resilience, they contribute to a collective re-storying that can shift social consciousness" and enrich our own lives (Mahmood 2025).

Second, in the academic setting it is extremely important to be aware of the learners' pressures and vulnerabilities. When using personal storytelling, facilitating debriefing sessions in a safe and welcoming environment is essential to protect the learners and the delicate balance that exists between sharing personal experiences, ethical boundaries, and confidentiality while fulfilling the learning objectives.

Third, the effectiveness of these learning methods and others (like *microlearning* or *flipped learning* for example) depends on the successful integration of institutional learning support across board governance, faculty, overall administrative setting and learning support (IT, policies, course design, curriculum management, digital or physical learning spaces, and so on), and learners' participation, motivation, context, and media engagement. In some settings the alignment of these factors might not always be possible, impacting the overall assessment of the method and the educational experience.

Storytelling and Administrators of Lifelong Learning

As organizations manage the exponential increase in the volume and variety of data, storytelling have been shown to effectively transfer different types of knowledges, bolstering collective identity, shifting organizational culture, and creating new ways to think about practice, and spaces for active learning and organizational memory (Jankowski and Baker 2019, 11). Academic and lifelong learning administrators can effectively transform data and visuals into compelling stories highlighting the adult learners' success stories (developing pride, satisfaction) and also their failures (developing empathy, intentionality in changing this reality) (Matthew 2025, 6–7). Telling personal stories about how a program has changed our own perspective of learning, diversity, or human essence—always tied up with the organizational mission—is a powerful tool to impact the decision-making of deans, board of trustees, denominational, or any other stakeholders on behalf of lifelong learning. Relevant elements of storytelling in management refer to 1) its communicational power defining the type of organization, positioning, values, mission and vision; 2) its power of engagement contributing contextualized narratives, 3) the administrators as potential mentors and inspirators, and 4) managers' storytelling and story writing skills might support situational multidimensional outlooks and guidelines for change (Rocha and Davel 2023, 3, 5). Like the gods in our story, administrators of academic and lifelong learning programs can harness the wisdom and power behind storytelling, inspiring people to let our skepticism go and make ourselves resonate in their agenda (Gottschall 2012).

Conclusion

The Zapatista's story opens enigmatic paths, each of them welcoming and frightening. Standing firm in a liberationist narrative pedagogy against colonizing and imperial ideologies, this Zapatista's story supports a decolonizing method to reflect critically on knowledge representation that privileges Western norms and cognitive styles. It provokes a review of relevant social processes—from stillness to motion, from meaningless individual chattering to cohesive oral expression and respectful effective listening, from self-centeredness to collectivism, from ignorance to shared wisdom to decolonizing formats of lifelong learning (Flores et al. 2025, 334–35).

Stories, like Jesus' parables, are twilight zones where we are invited to appreciate foundational aspects of ourselves, humanity, social or theological values, and an understanding of reality. As the theological ecosystem expands its lifelong learning opportunities, storytelling becomes an integral part of the learning process which is divine as well as human (UNESCO 2022). However, is it possible to move beyond the dichotomy of individualism/collectivism? We laugh at the idea of these unwise babbling gods, but at a much deeper level through its language dynamics, this story conveys one truth (and a subtle warning) about the balance required to move the world forward—out of paralysis and chaos—into interconnections, movement, new creations, and maybe hope.

Further research is needed to clarify the use of storytelling in a purposeful, integrated institutional vision building sustainability through the development of shared individual and collective knowledge of peoples. Our unique talents and experiences alongside the wisdom of the collective are necessary and sufficient to understand reality, to move the world forward and thus, to survive. Enabling the acquisition of wisdom from and towards each other might help us create a more inclusive learning environment and open new avenues for research and collaboration. Academic production lacks consistency on the use of stories in theological education and its associated management areas. Digital storytelling is here to stay, but how do we manage to make this experience not only a personal but also a lifelong learning one? Further research is also needed to validate the findings on the use of narratives and storytelling across these varied contexts.

Finally, how useful would it be to integrate administrative stories as case studies or the active participation of our own administrators

in our classrooms to provide a different perspective? These processes require partnerships, teamwork, and definitely administrative and academic willingness to test the boundaries of creative education and storytelling in our midst. Of course, we also require a persistent examination of the assumptions and values underpinning current learning methods (Lalujan and Pranjol 2024, 30–31). At the base of it all, however, “we tell stories to express our hardest, best, most authentic truths” (Dicks 2018, 25) and maybe to become wise while we continue to shape our world.

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Sustainability

Reimagining Information Literacy for Parish Clergy and Lifelong Learners

KRIS VELDHEER

Ministry is a vocation that demands more than theological knowledge or pastoral sensitivity. It requires the continual cultivation of wisdom, discernment, and adaptability in a rapidly changing cultural and informational landscape. How many times have we heard ministerial leaders lament, “They never taught me that in seminary!” While some might believe that completing a seminary program or graduate theology degree, for all its rigor and depth, is the endpoint of education for clergy, there is ongoing need for learning. Kathy Smith, former Director of Continuing Education for Calvin Theological Seminary, suggests, “Instead of trying to teach students everything they need to know, we try to teach them that they will have to be responsible for their learning from here on out” (Boehm 2023). However, many ministry professionals are ill-equipped during their formal education to determine what they do not know and what they still need to work on.

An essential component of preparation for lifelong learning is information literacy. The Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL), a division of the American Library Association, defines

information literacy as “the set of integrated abilities encompassing the reflective discovery of information, the understanding of how information is produced and valued, and the use of information in creating new knowledge and participating ethically in communities of learning” (2016, 8). The contemporary pastor must navigate complex cultural discourses, evaluate competing claims of authority, and respond to congregational needs with depth and integrity. At the heart of these challenges lies a pressing question: What information literacy skills are required to sustain a faithful and effective ministry throughout a lifetime?

This chapter argues for the importance of sustaining information literacy skills through lifelong learning for ministry. The concept of information fluency provides a framework for embedding information literacy into lifelong learning programs, emphasizing collaboration and commitment among individual learners. Proposed are a set of competencies for lifelong information literacy, reimagined in light of the practice of ministry, followed by a discussion of avenues and obstacles to information fluency education and recommendations for implementation within lifelong learning programs, emphasizing collaborative opportunities with librarians. The chapter concludes by naming ongoing challenges within institutional and congregational support systems.

Information Literacy and Information Fluency

In today’s digital and pluralistic environment, information literacy is more than a set of everyday skills; it is a capacity for theological discernment, critical evaluation, and ethical application. To understand information literacy more clearly, it is important to understand, “Information literacy fosters curiosity. It teaches people how to learn, not just what to learn. This makes it the engine of lifelong education” (Syracuse University School of Information Studies 2025). Information literacy teaches lifelong learners how to identify their information needs and how to evaluate the sources of information they find. Information literacy also promotes a means to develop curiosity around search strategies and the ethical use of information.

Over the course of many years, members of ACRL have defined and developed sets of standards for information literacy. The ACRL Framework for Information Literacy from 2016 builds on the work of

the *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education* first published by ACRL in 2000. The Framework emphasizes six threshold concepts essential for developing information literacy skills among students, particularly at the undergraduate level. The first three concepts are scholarship as conversation, research as inquiry, and information creation as process; the last three concepts assert that authority is constructed and contextual, searching is an exploration, and information has value (ACRL 2016).

Significantly, the ACRL Framework shifts the focus of information literacy from a checklist of skills to be mastered to a deeper understanding of the underpinning concepts of being information literate. The Framework also supports critical thinking and encourages learners to be active contributors, ultimately preparing them for the intricacies of information and research in the digital age. It is also intentionally flexible, allowing adaptation to specific contexts and needs. One of the many iterations of the work being done around information literacy is a 2016 paper by Emmett Lombard titled, “Information Fluency: Not Information Literacy 2.0.” Taking the ACRL standards in a different direction, Lombard distinguishes information fluency from information literacy. Building on the earlier work of Zhang from 2002, Lombard writes, “Zhang basically equates it as: information fluency = computer literacy + information literacy + critical thinking” (Zhang 2002, cited by Lombard 2016, 281). While he explores other views in the literature review section of his paper, Lombard concludes that “information fluency can and should be distinguished from information literacy. Instead of the current format distinctions, though, this paper recommends it be considered from an institutional perspective (i.e. a school’s effectiveness to facilitate information literacy)” (Lombard 2016, 282). From there, Lombard adds two components to Zhang’s information fluency formula, namely collaboration and commitment. However, collaboration is hindered in higher education for myriad reasons, including structural and personal obstacles like the fear of losing power.

While Lombard applies collaboration and commitment only at an institutional level, lifelong learning programs offer another way to think about the work of both Zhang and Lombard through applying it to individuals. For lifelong learning, this means that information fluency is greater than the ACRL standards and institutions. Lifelong learning programs serving those in ministry are uniquely positioned to leverage ministry skills such as collaboration as well as commitment to promote information fluency in their curricula.

A synthesis of the various approaches to information fluency, as identified by Lombard and others and as implemented in colleges and universities such as Seton Hall, Illinois State, and the University of Alaska, suggests four core competencies central to information fluency adaptable to lifelong learning:

1. Accurately identifying one's information needs in light of context and purpose.
2. Locating information relevant to that need using appropriate tools and strategies.
3. Evaluating the quality, authority, and relevance of the information.
4. Ethically and effectively using information to construct knowledge and inform action.

In ministry settings, these competencies are not abstract. They manifest when a pastor prepares a sermon, engages in community advocacy, counsels a parishioner, or evaluates theological claims on social media. Ministerial leaders must discern not only “what” information is true, but also “whose” information is privileged, “why” it matters, and “how” it shapes lives and communities.

Using the core competencies from information fluency as a model to reimagine information literacy for ministerial leaders as more than a set of technical skills, I propose a vocation-shaped capacity to:

- Accurately identify information needs in light of ministry context and denominational understandings;
- Navigate diverse and contested information ecologies to locate information relevant to their needs using appropriate tools and strategies;
- Model curiosity, humility, and discernment in the process of evaluating the quality, authority, and relevance of the information that is discovered; and
- Ethically and effectively use information to construct knowledge, inform action and equip congregants to do the same.

This framework moves ministerial leaders from consumers of information or those who are reliant on outdated skills to curators, interpreters, and guides. Further it positions pastors as communal learners, shaping congregations that read, reflect, and respond to the world with wisdom. This set of information literacy competencies for ministry also shifts the pastoral conversation from a view of clergy as

“a sage on the stage” to the role as “a guide on the side” which is a popular model both in educational as well as information literacy circles (see King 1993). Religious leaders are not simply trained once; they are formed continuously in their community through lifelong learning.

Lifelong Learning for Ministry

The need for ongoing information literacy education must be embedded within lifelong learning practices so that they are sustainable, contextual, and communal. The diversity of ministry settings—urban, rural, digital, multi-vocational—demands flexible and adaptive learning models. Further, with an increasing number of pastors being trained in online programs or regional academies and with denominational requirements in flux, the lifelong learning ecotone plays an even more important role in educating pastors and other ministry professionals. Lifelong learning and information literacy is for everyone engaged in ministry, both clergy and lay.

Lifelong learning is not merely a professional necessity; it is a theological imperative. The Greek word *mathētēs*, translated as *disciple*, literally means “learner.” Christian discipleship, then, is inherently tied to the practice of ongoing learning. Lifelong learning in ministry encompasses formal education, informal inquiry, reflective practice, and communal discernment. It is an attitude, a posture of humility and openness to transformation. Mark Rouch defines lifelong learning as “that quality of life characterized by openness to oneself, to others, and to the world, which lets learning occur anytime, anywhere” (2001, 23). David Stewart emphasizes that lifelong learning is not restricted by age or setting and must not be limited to professional development goals; instead, it arises from a theological vision of formation, where the minister becomes a student of God, of the community, and of the world (1987, 10f). The governance structure of many denominations provides for the continuing education of ministry leaders. Lifelong learning, or continuing education, is a fundamental necessity for those engaged in ministry of all types. Further, being information fluent means digital literacy must include critical thinking which is integrated into theological reflection. Information literacy and information fluency can teach pastors to call attention to power dynamics in information production and invites a faith-informed resistance to injustice, exclusion, and manipulation. Ministry leaders must be able

to examine not only the “what” but the “why” and “who” behind the information they use and share.

George Brown suggested four hopeful prospects for lifelong learning and ministry that fit well with information fluency. Brown suggested living the questions, working with mentors, becoming a reflective practitioner, and lastly, creating learning webs when more structured lifelong learning may not be available (Brown 1997). Living the questions models curiosity about information but more so about information needs in light of ministry contexts. Working with mentors is a two-way street where both the mentor and the mentee can learn from each other as they navigate information ecologies together. Becoming a reflective practitioner encourages constant learning as a person reflects on their knowledge from previous experiences. Reflective practitioners are always trying to better themselves. Finally, ministry leaders can create a learning web by using mentors and others engaged in learning—even when a structured program is not available—to construct knowledge appropriate to the ever-changing ministry environment they find themselves serving in. The critical analysis involved in being a reflective practitioner encourages pastors to keep their information literacy skills current which feeds directly into creating learning webs when needed training is unavailable.

Avenues and Obstacles to Information Fluency Education within Lifelong Learning

For most individuals involved in ministry, there are three typical avenues to pursue lifelong learning. First there is the individual path. Increasingly, pursuing a degree through Master of Arts or Doctor of Ministry programs requires online learning, and even taking courses to achieve a certificate is often done alone. The individual part can also include developing an individual reading regimen; or pursuing personal research projects. These individual learning paths can be done through a college or university, but they require the individual to initiate them. A second avenue is group-based learning involving case study groups, peer cohorts, clergy support groups, topical retreats, and continuing education workshops that provide structure, accountability, and shared reflection. Group-based learning may not result in earning a degree or achieving a certificate but does offer participants more flexibility and opportunities for longer-term involvement with the

same group of people. Finally, a third avenue arises from contextual need. Effective learning can be responsive to the immediate questions stemming from experiences within ministry. There are many issues including stewardship, financial literacy, conflict management, and mission situations that fit in this area. Because these issues have finite duration, contextual needs might be resolved with a quick class or even a self-help book. These three avenues are not exhaustive but can help shape thinking about why and how someone wants to learn.

Within the above avenues, one area that has shown particular promise is peer learning groups. In 2005, Marlis McCollum documented the Indiana Peer Group Study Program, where clergy self-organized around shared learning goals and held one another accountable over time. Participants reported renewed energy, increased relevance, and a deepened connection to their congregations. Learning agendas were flexible and contextual, often integrating spiritual direction, leadership formation, and community engagement (McCollum 2005). Other examples include congregations being educated in financial literacy by denomination officials. Many ministry settings also have dedicated missionaries who work with congregations in their contexts. Each of these ways to pursue lifelong learning has an information literacy component and a need to attend to information seeking skills. Furthermore, each of these ways emphasizes that those involved in ministry do not learn well in isolation. Lifelong learning is sustained through relationships, mutual reflection, and shared wisdom.

Sustaining lifelong learning is similar to the ongoing work of academic and theological librarians to rework one-shot teaching sessions or instruction in formation programs. Many theological librarians rely on “one-shots” (in library lingo) to insert information literacy into a seminary curriculum. A one-shot is “when a faculty member invites a librarian into the classroom to provide one-time information literacy instruction, typically related to a research assignment” (Nicholson 2016). While opinions vary widely among academic librarians about the effectiveness of using one-shots for information literacy instruction (Pho et. al. 2022), the concept of a one-shot library instruction session is not without merit. John Miles notes, “Ultimately, librarians would do well to make a virtue out of the necessity of such single-visit instruction sections, as their flexibility for professors means that they will be a central part of special collections’ instruction for the foreseeable future” (Miles 2023, 31). Due to their highly specialized nature, theological libraries are often compared to special collections libraries.

The seminary library provides a link between information literacy and human formation. Fiona Holly observed that human formation plays a considerable role in the lives of Catholic students studying for the priesthood and that their future roles create a strong need to be information literate because these students will be expected to lead congregations both spiritually and socially. Holly writes,

I have come to see that information literacy is especially important for future priests. None of us is a stranger to polarization in media and news. Catholic news media can be just as partisan and polarizing. Seminarians come into the seminary with their own experiences of the world and the church. The seminary has an even greater role in the lives of their students as they attempt to form them in preparation for the life of a parish priest. One hopes that their parish priest, despite their own personal perspectives and opinions, can have an objective sense of how the media operates, how information can be biased, and understand that responsibility in terms of ministering to people. (Holly 2022, 166)

Another issue is that learners often overestimate their information literacy skills. The inclination of people with a low ability in a specific area to give overly positive assessments of their ability in that area is known as the Dunning-Kruger effect (Dunning 2011). Notably, the Dunning-Kruger effect is not about a person's intelligence but rather their self-perception of skills in specific tasks. Thus, those seeking lifelong learning might think that their current information seeking skills are adequate to meet their needs and neglect to keep their information literacy skills current. Smith notes, "Being a lifelong learner is going to make you a better pastor. Having a character of humility and inquisitiveness will make you a better preacher, pastoral caregiver and teacher" (Boehm 2023). Those involved in the lifelong learning ecotone can help their learning community understand the need to keep all of their skills up to date.

While individual initiative is crucial, systemic support is equally necessary. Too often, congregations fail to value their pastor's learning, treating continuing education as a luxury or burden. Smith notes "Some churches don't value their pastor's need for continuing education. . . . They may ask the pastor to use vacation to pursue learning opportunities" (Boehm 2023). On the other hand, Smith also makes a point to mention that some denominations require clergy to engage in regular continuing education. If there are no requirements, Smith

says, “Making time and funds available for a pastor’s learning is crucial” (Boehm 2023). Further, Smith advises clergy to ask about a church’s commitment to lifelong learning before they accept a call or a position with a church; because of the demands of ministry, lifelong learning needs to be intentional on the part of both the pastor and the church (Boehm 2023).

Ministerial leaders should share what they are learning with their congregations and ministry contexts. A reasonable expectation, according to Smith, is that the church’s governing council receive a report (Boehm 2023). Accountability between the pastor and the congregation also shows that each cares and is interested in the other. McCollum notes a deepened connection between ministers and their congregations when they share what they are learning (2005). From personal experience, congregants want to know what the pastor is reading and how their learning is being expressed through sermons or classes. Lifelong learning in all of its many forms is also a way for ministerial leaders to build reading lists for book studies and to find appropriate topics for adult formation. Intentionality about lifelong learning should be accompanied by intentionality about information literacy skills.

Recommendations for Lifelong Learning Programs

When integrating information literacy into lifelong learning, it would be wise to enlist librarians in the effort. Any information literacy work should start with design principles that anchor information fluency into lifelong learning programs. Focusing on information literacy is not enough because being literate does not mean being fluent. Pastors need to know more than which tools to use. For example, lifelong learners need to understand how Google and Copilot search the internet so they can construct effective searches to save themselves time. Learners also need to know how to read the results of a search so they can look past sponsored ads.

The lived experience of theological librarians informs several specific recommendations. Building peer work that is collaborative rather than a one-off list of skills helps build information fluency. Pastors can build learning networks with other ministry professionals as they learn the content of a lifelong learning program. Such collaboration is particularly useful for part-time, solo, or rural ministry settings.

Peer work also builds community. Similarly, learners should clarify who curates the content learners are using in a course. What makes the materials being used or recommended useful other than the opinion of the instructor? This inquiry is an opportunity to learn from librarians how to read book reviews to make better content decisions for specific ministry settings.

Librarians are particularly adept at teaching learners how to participate in curating their own content over time. Resources include simple language guides, Frequently Asked Questions, and examples to support multilingual learners and those enrolled in an online only program. These resources build a learner's information literacy skills by promoting self-instruction, which also frees the instructor to work on a more conceptual level. Librarians can also help learners create a powerful knowledge set of curated, discipline specific, concept-rich resources that go beyond the learner's everyday experience. Learners should not be satisfied with a generic set of skills when they can be taught to think more critically about the impact of their research on their ministry settings.

Librarianship offers many other tools to help learners in a lifelong learning program. Partnering with a librarian to curate and teach with specific, topical subject guides will help learners develop vocabulary in areas that might be new to them. A quick Internet search provides examples of subject guides in other libraries. Mapping threshold concepts, which are the core knowledge and capabilities that lifelong learners must successfully move through to be successful in a given program, is another way to help learners level up their vocabulary and integrate discovery tools, such as journal searches or Google Scholar. Some institutions use LibGuides, a tool that can be embedded in online learning programs or course websites (Ashikuzzaman 2024). Beyond teaching the vocabulary of the class or program, these tools also emphasize what is important to remember. Librarians might have ready subject guides that can be adapted.

Learners can also build fluency through open and iterative course readers that put disciplinary ideas first, offering a glossary of terms to help learners build fluency. Building reading discussions into online learning systems will help learners with key concepts and information evaluation. Discussion groups also promote reflective practices for learners and provide important practice in reading and annotating of key concepts. These practices also promote among learners the lifelong art of managing their sources. Some theological libraries offer one-shot classes on bibliographic software such as Zotero (<https://zotero.org>) to

manage resources and Lean Library (<https://download.leanlibrary.com/leanlibraryopen>) as a resource finding tool.

Lastly, micro-credentials that align with the concepts of the class can be embedded in lifelong learning programs. These tools can check not just the “how” but also an understanding of the “why,” countering the Dunning-Kruger effect discussed above. Offering these stackable badges throughout a program of lifelong learning shows a commitment the learner makes over time and demonstrates program sustainability. Librarians may have many of these modules already built in Learning Management Systems like Moodle, Canvas, Desire2Learn, and others to develop knowledge and skills around information management and information fluency. Further, these modules can be used as evaluation tools to check knowledge retention.

Ongoing Challenges

A goal of lifelong learning programs must be sustainability for both the learner and the program. At the end of a class, can the learner demonstrate they have mastered the concepts, evidenced by rubric scores or other assessments? If available, has the learner made a sustained commitment to badges or micro-credentials, particularly if they return to the same program over time? Does a given lifelong learning program see the same learners taking classes and engaging in programming in a sustainable manner? These criteria are a few ways to measure impact on the learner and the program, while at the same time helping the learner to build lifelong information literacy skills and information fluency.

Technology has revolutionized access to information and created new responsibilities for information literacy. Clergy and lay leaders alike are immersed in a digital world saturated with data, misinformation, ideological polarization, and too many options. Many churches have saturated their services with technology, and the use of technology will only increase with time. No mention of digital tools would be complete without mention of artificial intelligence and AI tools, creating controversies like those that swirled when research tools like Wikipedia were launched. Some learners and lifelong learning programs have embraced AI and are learning both its potential and limitations. Others are choosing to limit or eliminate discussions around the use of AI, preferring instead to navigate the information

landscape with other tools. Ministerial leaders would do well to take lifelong learning classes to better understand how to use AI as both a research tool and a partner in parish ministry.

Conclusion

In a world of rapid change and contested truth, the call to lifelong learning and information literacy is not optional for clergy and ministry leaders—it is essential. Ministry today demands not only theological competence but also the wisdom to navigate the information age with care, discernment to choose appropriate resources, and adaptability to change with technology. By integrating the ideas and suggestions in this chapter, lifelong learning programs can cultivate a new generation of clergy who are not overwhelmed by information but formed through it. Supported by institutions, enriched by peers, and engaged with their congregations, these leaders will model a lifelong journey of faithful inquiry. The church that learns together grows together, and the pastor who continues to learn will not only preach and teach more effectively but will help lead the church into a more informed, compassionate, and discerning future.

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Global Citizenship Education as a Framework for Lifelong Learning

LINDSAY ANDREOLLI-COMSTOCK

Ministers and faith leaders face an unprecedented set of challenges in the twenty-first century. The rapid pace of globalization has brought with it escalating and oftentimes volatile social, political, financial, and environmental issues that permeate public and private life. From the obvious acceleration of climate change to increasing migration numbers and widening socio-economic inequalities alongside unchecked political polarization, many faith leaders struggle to respond faithfully. While some ministers engage directly with the politics of their local community through social activism, many do not feel adequately equipped to tackle such polarizing issues without specialized training. Ministry in the twenty-first century is a complex amalgamation of interrelated issues and local, real-world impacts, demanding a global model for training effective leadership.

One such model, Global Citizenship Education (GCED), is an innovative, multi-dimensional educational framework designed to promote engaged global citizens. First formalized as an educational framework by UNESCO in 2011, GCED has been adopted by notable organizations, including the United Nations and Oxfam, and is incorporated into the

Sustainable Development Goals. GCED creates active participants in the work of building a more just and generous world.

This chapter presents Global Citizenship Education as a transformative andragogical framework for lifelong learning for ministry, uniquely positioned to equip faith leaders with the necessary knowledge, skills, and perspective to address global realities. I begin with the imperative for a global framework. I then present the pillars of the GCED model, explore critical scholarship around approaches to implementation, examine the core competencies for developing a faith-based global citizen, and discuss how theological education is already embracing GCED-like learning experiences in existing programs. I conclude with recommendations for lifelong learning programs to become GCED-focused.

A Global Educational Framework

Global Citizenship Education is a distinctive educational framework that aims to foster a new type of citizen. GCED differs from conventional educational models and teaching theories. It represents a new form of civic learning, as evidenced by the evolution of more traditional civic and citizenship education to incorporate global perspectives as part of its core competencies (Damiani and Fraillon 2025). Global citizenship is a multi-faceted and inclusive approach to global education that “endeavor[s] [to] comprise moral, political, legal, cultural, economic, spiritual, and environmental dimensions” (Drerup 2019, 32). Learners are asked to do more than just think critically about their global context. Learners in GCED programs are also encouraged to design and participate in community projects that address global social, political, economic, and environmental issues (Ban 2012). The central goal of GCED is to foster respect for all people, the planet, and future generations by building a sense of shared humanity and collective cooperation.

GCED is less about influencing which side a learner may take on a given issue and more about helping them consider their interconnected existence and the impacts of their everyday decisions more thoughtfully. By empowering learners to see themselves as part of a larger whole, GCED creates active participants in the work of local and global transformation. Working together, leaders and communities can more effectively address global injustices and inequities. According to

the United Nations' Global Education First Initiative, education must extend beyond the basics of reading and writing to encompass the perspectives necessary for cultivating peaceful, sustainable, and equitable communities (Ban 2012, 6). This approach sets GCED apart from other education frameworks by implying a moral and ethical imperative as well as a collective responsibility to address the increasing tensions of a fragmented world.

Global Citizenship Education is an educational framework structuring the entire task of education, rather than a single subject within a set curriculum, thereby connecting personal values and civic action to broader social impact. The goal is to move learners beyond simply accepting information at face value to thinking critically about the nature of information and its impact on life. By considering the source and context of information and asking who it benefits, learners can make informed decisions about how to respond in a way that benefits not only themselves and their immediate communities but also others. Not content with simply raising awareness, learners collectively move beyond passive responses to global injustice to active decolonization practices that benefit those most acutely impacted by systemic injustice and inequality.

GCED emphasizes the learner's ability to think critically, understanding the interconnected ways in which their actions impact the global community, and then to respond in ways that prioritize the well-being of humanity, rather than focusing solely on one class, ethnicity, generation, or nation. This framework for education is built from a lifelong learning perspective that begins with early childhood education and extends through adulthood. It assumes the continuous need to revisit long-held assumptions and even popular interpretations to ensure that, whether formal or informal, the education one receives is timely, relevant, and bigger than a single-story perspective (Global Citizenship Foundation 2022). Learners in this environment are active participants and contributors rather than receivers of established theories and concepts. Learners bring their own unique, contextualized perspectives to the task of education.

Three Pillars of the GCED Framework

Global Citizenship Education aims to instill a set of core competencies, enabling citizens to navigate the increasingly complex and fractured

nature of global society more effectively. These competencies include critical thinking, problem-solving, empathy, conflict resolution, and self-reflection (UNESCO, n.d.), which are built on three pillars of learning: cognitive knowledge, socio-emotional development, and behavioral change. This three-fold framework empowers learners with the knowledge, perspective, and critical thinking skills necessary to understand systemic, global issues from a local, contextual perspective—ensuring a holistic vision of transformation in context.

The cognitive pillar addresses the need for in-depth, unbiased information regarding the global realities of historical events and current developments related to topics such as human rights, social justice, and sustainable development. Learners must move beyond theoretical abstractions and theological proclamations to develop concrete understandings of how systemic issues of violence, oppression, and climate change impact the lives of community members. The cognitive structure is particularly important when the pursuit of truth, both in historical and current events, is subject to distortion and misinterpretation.

The socio-emotional pillar focuses on the attitudes and core values needed to foster a global citizenship mentality. Values of empathy, respect, and solidarity are instilled through skill development and relationship-building within a specific, local context. Active listening and conflict resolution skills help learners develop a mindset centered on shared values, with compassion and genuine concern for others as paramount.

The third pillar, behavior, is about taking action. After acquiring the proper knowledge and applying the appropriate values and attitudes in context, learners translate their training into practical action. This work includes participating in social movements, engaging in decolonizing practices, and fostering a lifelong commitment to address the global challenges that characterize the twenty-first century. Despite the name “Global Citizenship Education,” GCED-oriented actions acknowledge the interconnected nature of the local and global. A dynamic perspective assumes that local actions have a broader impact than just their immediate context and, if undertaken with a deeper understanding of global implications, local actions can empower the entire society.

Approaches to GCED Implementation

Architects and supporters of Global Citizenship Education believe that education should play a crucial role in helping learners collaborate to build the structures and mindsets necessary for a more just and peaceful society. An ongoing ideological debate within the field of GCED, led by two academic scholars, Martha Nussbaum and Vanessa Andreotti, emphasizes that this framework is not just an intellectual pursuit but also an impassioned call to action. While Nussbaum and Andreotti generally agree on the principles of GCED, they differ significantly in their approach to teaching.

The soft approach is characterized by broader pedagogical strokes that emphasize a shared human existence, a common home planet, and a collective responsibility to provide a livable future for generations to come. It implies that humans everywhere have a moral obligation to help those in need and recognize and respond to how their individual decisions impact others. The “soft” approach to Global Citizenship Education is endorsed by organizations such as the United Nations and Oxfam. Martha Nussbaum argues that a broader understanding of global responsibility is urgently necessary in light of our current global situation. Vasil Gluchman claims that Nussbaum’s support for the soft approach invites learners to explore intercultural sensitivity and critical thinking in a less pressured environment, allowing them the opportunity to gain a better understanding of the world and their place in it (Gluchman 2018). Andreotti disagrees, arguing that this approach is too gentle and borders on raising awareness rather than on organizing calculated, strategic action to address the root causes of injustice and inequity (Andreotti 2006, 41). In Andreotti’s opinion, the soft approach “points to a central issue in global citizenship education: whether and how to address the economic and cultural roots of the inequalities in power and wealth/labour distribution in a global complex and uncertain system” (Andreotti 2006, 41). Andreotti suggests that this approach may inadvertently reinforce existing power structures rather than challenge them, likening the approach to “sanctioned ignorance” (Andreotti 2006, 44).

The “critical” approach to Global Citizenship Education is deeply rooted in postcolonial thought emerging from the Global South and aims to deconstruct the global structures that cause inequality and oppression. It recognizes a global history of Christo-centric, paternalistic charity and argues that the focus should be on mutual accountability

rather than helping others. For Andreotti, the nature of the problem with the critical approach is not a lack of development or education, as the soft approach would imply. Instead, it highlights the complex structures and power dynamics that lead to and reinforce inequities (Andreotti 2006, 46). In contrast, Nussbaum is skeptical as to whether the critical approach is the best way to approach Global Citizenship Education. In her book, *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education*, she emphasizes the importance of developing individual skills, such as critical self-reflection and empathy, to foster a sense of shared citizenship (Nussbaum 1998, 50–55).

The critical approach, like the more widely accepted soft approach, has its challenges. As systemic injustice and destabilizing polarity increase globally, the weight of determining the most effective way to effect change is a worrisome concern. In response, many have resigned themselves to armchair activism, opting for a passive approach to calling out injustice without taking the necessary actions required to move society towards a new reality. The passivity of social media, which disconnects users from the physical consequences experienced by victims of these inequalities, often exacerbates the issues. Advocates of the soft approach are concerned that guilt and criticism—the guilt of not better understanding complex global systems and persistent criticism of how best to impact society through social action—threaten to paralyze potential supporters, who are needed to effect systemic change. These concerned but overwhelmed citizens, in turn, operate passively through social media—or opt not to participate at all—rather than risk participating in a way that might be deemed inappropriate or harmful.

Reorienting Ministerial Education Around GCED

A GCED-based program for ministers and faith leaders would benefit from addressing the concerns of the critical approach with the understanding of the soft approach. The goal is to create a hospitable framework for learning and growth, which involves both critical self-evaluation and evidence-based program evaluation to determine the impact not just on the transformation of ministerial leadership but also on the community at large. Like GCED, theological education aims to move beyond foundational knowledge and basic

skills to teach the advanced skills and abilities needed to facilitate leadership in faith-based organizations and church communities.

GCED-based programs emphasize the intimate connection between local issues and global concerns. GCED helps ministers and faith leaders recognize their local actions and the social standing of their faith communities as part of a larger, global effort focused on the common good. This mindset enables ministers to reframe the definition of ministerial effectiveness, defining it less by church growth and balanced budgets and more by their ability to help parishioners connect, engage, and act in solidarity with their global neighbors. A GCED-based curriculum would empower ministers to view their local actions as part of a larger, global effort, helping them to develop hard skills in critical thinking, project management, and problem-solving (Global Citizen Year Academy 2022). Similarly, in a world marked by culture wars and religious intolerance, the ability to engage in meaningful interreligious dialogue and transformative intercultural engagement is a core competency for peaceful coexistence. Skills such as cultivating respect, empathy, and open-mindedness are foundational concepts in Global Citizenship Education, laying the groundwork for individual and collective transformation (UNESCO n.d.).

Another benefit when reorienting ministerial practice and training around GCED is the focus on social-emotional learning. Burnout and resignation among ministers are heightened due to increased workload, financial constraints, and vocational uncertainty. GCED, with its focus on social-emotional wellness, provides a robust framework for cultivating compassion and understanding of the deep-seated resiliency necessary for justice-driven leadership. Ministers trained within a GCED educational framework, in the words of Martha Nussbaum, understand that “compassion . . . is a central bridge between the individual and the community” (Nussbaum 1996, 28, quoted in Little 2021). This type of cognitive and moral awareness also prevents the paralysis so common among those concerned about the fight for justice. Constant engagement with complex global systems of injustice often leads to fatigue and cynicism, requiring a theological toolkit grounded in GCED understandings. The emotional fortitude afforded to those who are equipped in this way creates room for “emotional imagination,” thereby allowing for the mental clarity necessary to continue the work of decolonizing justice (Cocquyt and Palombo 2023, 60).

Designing GCED-Oriented Lifelong Learning Programs

Global Citizenship Education can be implemented in different ways. Some theological schools offer courses on intercultural competency and interfaith dialogue as part of their regular degree programs. Others introduce study abroad immersion courses that invite students to consider Christian perspectives outside of a Western context. While these approaches are popular, they lack the comprehensiveness to ensure that GCED is not reduced simply to a subject one can opt in or out of but instead becomes a lifestyle that informs the whole of one's ministry.

Lifelong learning, which falls largely outside the accrediting standards of formal theological education, provides the flexibility to reorient ministerial training and practice around the core competencies of Global Citizenship Education. This framework is a compelling approach for theological education, allowing ministers and community leaders to connect social responsibility to their faith tradition. Furthermore, GCED can become a lifelong pursuit of both knowledge and practical application. As society shifts, faith leaders must continually reevaluate their role in caring for humanity through their own decisions, actions, and ministerial practices.

Lifelong learning in a theological context is well-suited to embrace Global Citizenship Education as an andragogical framework for several reasons. First, lifelong learning has as its mission to address the emerging needs of ministers and faith leaders in the Church and the world. Thus, lifelong learning programs exist to fill knowledge gaps and address emerging programs related to the ministry context. Second, lifelong learning programs are specifically designed to work with seasoned ministerial practitioners. In other words, leaders in lifelong learning focus on the distinct needs of practicing ministers and faith leaders in ways that traditional formal training does not. Third, most lifelong learning programs already embrace a learner-centered, andragogical approach to equipping adult learners. These programs understand the inherent value not only of lived experience but also of collective expertise, which helps enhance and nuance educational offerings. Thus, lifelong learning programs provide the perfect environment to embrace a GCED framework for continuous, relevant, and timely improvement in ministry.

In the most transformative approach, according to leading agencies like UNESCO and Oxfam, GCED becomes the andragogical framework

through which the whole of learning occurs. One of the benefits of this “whole school” approach to GCED for lifelong learning is that there is no need for a new course with a seasoned subject matter expert solely focused on GCED. Instead, the focus lies in revising rather than replacing existing content. Revision enables lifelong learning programs and centers for continuous learning to refine their existing courses by highlighting key aspects such as justice, equity, and sustainability. Recognizing and addressing the three GCED pillars of cognitive, socio-emotional, and behavioral transformation makes an immediate impact among ministers and faith leaders who need a more relevant approach to today’s problems.

This “whole school” approach embeds GCED principles in everything from preaching to pastoral care, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of global citizenship. And in this context, the role of the educator undergoes a transformational shift, as does the curriculum. Instead of mere subject matter experts, educators are trained to be skilled facilitators who guide and support learners on their academic journey. Educators must learn to embody many of the skills and model GCED behaviors, such as courage, vulnerability, authenticity, critical thinking, compassion, and peaceful resolution. Inherent in this shift is the need for educators to share in the learning experience, allowing adult learners the autonomy to engage with materials in ways that are relevant to their context. This shift requires a level of confidence and flexibility on the part of the educator, not to hold the learning experience hostage but to journey alongside learners as they discover together what is needed to thrive. Most educators will require training for this facilitator role, for which lifelong learning is uniquely suited.

Intentional Pedagogies

Global Citizenship Education requires intentional pedagogies for cultivating the skills necessary for ministerial leadership. The following section analyzes transformative pedagogical strategies, including the development of ‘brave space’ and the decolonization of theological education, through which The School of Global Citizenry embodies the principles of Citizenship Education (GCED).

The School of Global Citizenry’s mission is explicit: “to grow vital global citizenship competencies through high-quality educational opportunities in an intentionally international and socially

responsible online academic ecosystem.” The school is branded as a “CEU-certified, online school” specializing in global citizenship education, specifically targeting postgraduate adult learners. The GCED philosophy is most apparent in The School’s embodied curriculum, in which course content is rooted in the lived experience of the instructors, each learner, and in its global classrooms, highlighting the unique diversity of its faculty and student body. The School intentionally recruits postgraduate learners from around the world, complementing the intentional diversity among the faith-based nonprofit leaders, transitional ministry executives, adjunct religious and civic educators, and seasoned social entrepreneurs who serve as faculty. This intentional diversity fosters global community and facilitates genuine intercultural and interreligious dialogue, promoting diverse theological perspectives and critical thinking for ministry—essential aspects of global citizenship.

Brave space is premised on the belief that human growth requires an environment where people are willing to take risks and be courageous with the truth. First introduced by Brian Arao and Kristi Clemens (2013), the term “brave space” refers to a reframed conversation space that centers honesty and vulnerability (brave space) over comfort (safe space). Arao and Clemens argued that discomfort is inevitable, so focusing on creating a space devoid of discomfort is counterproductive. In a brave space, the principles of dialogue are used to build trust and foster cooperation, rather than to avoid disagreement or discomfort on topics such as cultural or religious diversity. Brave space is cultivated using regional reflection cohorts and seasoned teaching assistants in Faith Matters Network’s Movement Chaplaincy training course, which has been hosted at The School of Global Citizenry since 2019.

Another approach to cultivating the skills necessary for ministerial leadership in hostile times is to decolonize theological education. Rather than adding GCED-oriented components to a pre-existing curriculum, decolonization calls for a reexamination of the historical development of theological education. Three authors in the *Theological Education Between the Times* series, Elizabeth Conde-Frazier (2021), Keri Day (2021), and Chloe Sun (2020), offer distinct theological perspectives (Latinx, womanist, and Asian, respectively) on decolonizing theology. Considered together, they identify three key movements necessary for the decolonization of theological education. First, GCED focuses on social justice with an appreciation for difference and sustainable development. This intellectual environment

presents an opportunity for inquiry into the historical development of theological education, the European-centric ideologies embedded in its current manifestation, and the dominant influence it has on the environments in which ministers are currently trained to lead. This inquiry opens the door to a serious consideration of more inclusive educational frameworks that recognize the historical power of white, European histories over modern theological perspectives. This approach decentralizes these perspectives and ensures that a broader diversity of histories, perspectives, and worldviews are represented. For example, The School of Global Citizenry prioritizes courses taught by LGBTQIA+, BIPOC, and women faculty, thereby elevating more diverse and contextual perspectives, such as indigenous, womanist, and queer spiritualities.

Second, by challenging the Eurocentric development of theological education, GCED introduces postcolonial theology as a primary lens through which to approach biblical interpretation. Moving beyond Western perspectives, postcolonial theology liberates hermeneutical studies by introducing a more culturally sensitive focus on liberation as a valid approach to biblical study (Drerup 2019, 31–32). A decolonial approach affords marginalized and underrepresented communities more ownership over their histories and invites dominant communities to consider the importance of interpretation from the margins. For example, The School of Global Citizenry trains instructors to curate the diverse perspectives in their courses, thereby giving voice to less dominant understandings and promoting collective knowledge exchange.

The third strategy for decolonizing theological education involves valuing divergent perspectives through the use of online learning modalities. Increasingly common due to the pedagogical shifts necessary to accommodate learning needs during the COVID-19 pandemic, theological schools are using online learning more than ever before. This leveraging of technology caters to non-traditional students and those who are otherwise excluded from theological education, affording them access across time zones, continents, and languages, and often for less money than traditional face-to-face learning experiences. For example, The School of Global Citizenry hosts learners from 34 different countries, and through intentional educational design training, teaches online educators to decentralize their own perspective in order to create a safe digital space for the unique perspectives of global learners.

Recommendations

Global Citizenship Education as an andragogical framework offers a strategic vision for forming ministerial leaders for the public square. Its three-pillar approach provides a robust framework for ministerial training in the twenty-first century, moving beyond simple knowledge transmission or abstract biblical application to offering ministers and other faith leaders the cognitive, socio-emotional, and behavioral skills needed to navigate unprecedented times with compassion.

By making the necessary adjustments to adopt this framework, lifelong learning is positioned to provide profoundly relevant training that addresses not only the needs of the Church but also those of the world. A successful program transition to GCED should include: 1) a formal commitment to GCED, 2) buy-in from and training for faculty and administration, 3) a plan for the comprehensive revision of all courses, 4) leveraging technology to widen access to educational opportunities, and 5) a commitment to continuous improvement, collaboration, examination, and evaluation. This transition necessitates a bold departure from traditional forms of theological education. Understanding the local as intimately connected to the global and ourselves as part of a bigger whole, Global Citizenship Education provides a new language for twenty-first-century ministry and a new hope for equipping everyday saints for active engagement in God's compassionate justice.

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From Accidental Academic to Living and Leading Lifelong Learning

LISA KIMBALL

I had used up nineteen of my thirty pre-paid minutes at an internet café in Quetzaltenango, Guatemala when I read an unexpected email from the academic dean of Virginia Theological Seminary (VTS). Several people had suggested my name for a faculty position as Director of the Center for the Ministry of Teaching and Professor of Christian Formation. I probably wasted two more precious minutes staring at the text before I quickly crafted a polite, “thank you, I am traveling in Central America and will be back in touch when I return home to Minneapolis.” In that moment, I was grateful for the excuse of my travels to postpone what would inevitably become an awkward “thank you, but no thank you” conversation. Or so I thought.

While senior leaders in lifelong learning at ATS accredited schools are credentialed in a variety of academic disciplines with diverse work experiences, in 2008, sitting on an uncomfortable chair in a Guatemalan café, I had a litany of reasons why my particular life story and academic training would not be a good fit for a denominational seminary faculty. Aside from the fact that I was happily ensconced in the School of Social Work at the University of Minnesota, I had no formal theological

education. My interdisciplinary Ph.D. is in community education and informal learning. I only sought a PhD, after years spent working in and for the church, after I was fired from a position I loved by a bishop because I and others told him truths he did not want to hear. I thought, back then, that by pursuing this degree—focusing on critical theory, informal learning, and community youth development—I could get away from professional “church” work and its often insular, even toxic, culture that has become structurally and imaginatively dispirited by creeping secularism. But God had other ideas.

When I reflect on the path of my vocation to seek and share lifelong learning on the landscape of theological education, I see, hear, and feel stories and sages that knit together the narrative of my adult life. At times these vignettes appear to my imagination as dominoes that fall onto one another in sequential order of a life unfolding. At other times the voices I hear, the faces I see, and the choices I made do not fall neatly into a linear timeline of growth but rather circle back and forth in rhythms and seasons of intensification, proving T.S. Eliot’s wisdom,

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.
(T. S. Eliot, “Little Giddings,” lines 181–84)

Therefore, in this chapter, I use autoethnography, a genre of academic writing, to provide a structure to interrogate dimensions of my personal experience in the context of a rapidly changing North American theological education landscape for the purpose of revealing characteristics of sustainability in lifelong learning for ministry. For lifelong learning initiatives to flourish in the dynamism of increased uncertainty and ubiquitous change, more is needed on the part of individual leaders and their institutions than the corporate values of “agility” and “strategic innovation.” It requires personal, institutional, and religious reflexivity, and enough humility to acknowledge limitations. The chapter ends with signs of hope for future sustainability in lifelong learning for ministry. I believe that with God’s help, and our hard work, these sustainable possibilities are an imminent reality. It is my deep longing that readers of this volume may experience resonance that invites and challenges you and your institutions to flourish in today’s complex ecotone.

Autoethnography

Just as lifelong learning is an ecotone, a transitional space with its own distinct ecology, autoethnography holds a distinct space in the landscape of social science research. Through retrospection and systematic analysis it “challenges canonical ways of doing research and representing others and treats research as a political, socially-just and socially-conscious act” (Ellis, Adams, and Bochner 2010). More specifically and appropriately for this investigation, autoethnography demonstrates the significance of personal experience in the creation and workings of culture and social structures. It foregrounds embodied personal experience as a credible data source and context for research. It offers a method for grappling with the subjective, everyday, and emergent aspects of lived experience and bridges the personal and the political, showing how being and becoming with others (people, other species, the planet) helps us co-create a better world (Jones and Adams 2023, 425; see also Adams et al. 2015).

My decision to engage this methodology is derived from two lines of reasoning. First, the work of lifelong learning for ministry is grounded in the spiritual and theological work of ministry. My road from the School of Social Work at the University of Minnesota to retiring as the Vice President for Lifelong Learning at Virginia Theological Seminary has had no end of twists and turns. By offering glimpses of my spiritual encounters along this road, I hope readers will experience something of the I-Thou encounter in their own spiritual and vocational journeys (Buber 1996). In the words of Wendy Anne Bilgen, “The qualities of the I- and Thou encounter are mirrored in autoethnography as the autoethnographer (*I*) and the reader/participant (*Thou*) share a numinous, sacred, spiritual exchange rooted in story and reflection upon it. Processes inherent to autoethnographic work enable the conditions wherein the sacredness of I-Thou encounters are nourished” (2022, 1). Second, the work of lifelong learning for ministry is systemic and contextual, grounded in the realities of the people we serve.

My story is distinct, but not entirely unique, and when examined closely reveals themes, decision points, practices, risks, and failures that other leaders and institutions will recognize. “Autoethnographers see the world-in-relation, connecting a researcher’s interest or stake in a particular experience to other people, communities, institutions, economies, and contexts” (Jones and Adams 2023, 426). I would not be who I am today—as a teacher, scholar, administrator, or Christian—in

isolation. People I have encountered along the way as colleagues, mentors, collaborators, and even competitors have inspired me to dig deeper and imagine farther.

At our best, leaders in lifelong learning know that we are interconnected and interdependent. Our bodies know that wonder and human flourishing are deeply intertwined (Schinkel et al. 2023). To watch a person learn in any stage of life, especially at times when they thought they were “done with” or too old for new learning, growing or changing as they age, is to watch a person give birth to a deeper, more aware and more true version of themselves. Often these new versions of former lives are more generous, more patient, more humble, and more curious versions than anything that came before. Leaders in lifelong learning have seen these transformations, and this witness of new lives born bonds us as practitioners in awe and reverence for the beauty of human flourishing in all stages of life.

From There to Here

Looking back at the arc of my formal education and professional life, it makes sense that I feel at home in these two in-between worlds of lifelong learning and autoethnography. I have never had a job that has been done or modeled by someone else before me; each job description was aspirational, innovative, and shaped largely around my gifts. I have consistently been drawn to work that is patched together out of pressing need. I can also now see that—although I have made objectively foolish financial decisions in doing so—I was accepting these patchwork positions because I trusted I was following the call of something beyond conventional—or even exclusively human—wisdom.

When I reflect on the lifelong learning and continuing education programs I know best—that are meeting the needs of ministry leaders today—I see creative, responsive, resilient, research-informed structures and approaches that remind me of my undergraduate transcript: a meandering but intentional journey across disciplines, especially when compared to my classmates who chose a predetermined pathway toward specialization and expertise. To be clear, I am not suggesting that leaders in lifelong learning lack intellectual depth or expertise. Rather, I recognize a community of rigorous interdisciplinary thinkers whose expertise is grounded in praxis,

which in turn informs their theory and theology. As such, many of us identify as practical theologians who embrace the classic praxis-theory-praxis rhythm of being and knowing, with roots that can be traced to Aristotle's concept of *phronesis* (knowledge as a form of practical reasoning or perception.)

I vividly remember one of the turning points that led me down this path. In graduate school, fifteen of us were being guided through an experience of phenomenological interpretation by the Canadian scholar Max van Manen. I can see the clock on the wall of that windowless basement room, and I can still hear my gasp when I realized that it was 10:00pm. Class had begun at 6:30pm and should have ended at 9:30pm, but all of us were in flow (Csikszentmihalyi 2008), fully immersed in the experience, and had completely lost track of time. Being pressed to find words to describe what is essential about a ubiquitous material object such as a chair or the human lived experience of grief was simultaneously an existential crisis and vocational awakening for many of us. Postmodernism had already shaken our attachments to certainty, but now we were being invited to reflect systematically on our conscious experiences in order to uncover the rich, contextual meanings and deeply ingrained structures that lie behind the daily lived experiences that many of us take for granted.

From that semester on, promises made at my baptism took on new proportions. I began to interrogate deeply what it means to “love my neighbor as myself” and “respect the dignity of every human being” (The Episcopal Church 1979, 305) as a white, Western, cis-gendered, upper middle class, well-educated, non-disabled person. Analogously, economic forces of globalization were radically disrupting hegemonic assumptions about work and learning. In the late twentieth century, programs of “continuing education” for ministry usually occurred in pre-determined, gathered, and highly structured environments, but by the early twenty-first century, it was becoming clear that those expectations did not serve the needs and realities of most ministry leaders. The knowledge economy continues to become monetized and stratified. On-demand digital content proliferates on a massive and incomprehensible scale. Pedagogy in general is increasingly—and rightly—being held to higher standards that account for the realities of cultural and neurological diversity. In such an environment, it is no wonder that defining even the “essentials” of learning for ministry leaders has become an ongoing and contested debate.

Here and Now

In 2009 after I had, in fact, accepted the faculty and administrative position at VTS, I inherited a continuing education program which had been well known as a certificate-granting evening school for commuters, with excellent classes taught by both seminary and adjunct faculty. By the time I arrived, it was collapsing. Our first, urgent priority was to examine what the church actually needed, while taking into account the seminary's core mission, available resources, and an operative dialectic between global and local learning. Questions of access, language, and pedagogy were pressing, and we were not alone. Diminishing distinctions between home-life and work-life, formal and informal learning were occupying scholars and practitioners around the world (Cooper and Walters 2009). The democratization of learning—with its shift from teacher-centered, content-focused pedagogies to learner-centered, dialogical, and collaborative approaches—was both invigorating and destabilizing. Dedicated longtime employees across theological continuing education programs were scrambling not only to integrate these fundamental shifts to their baseline assumptions but also to keep up with the flood of digital tools (and the skills needed to use them)—and all of this with increasing pressure to generate revenue.

One of the best decisions I made early in my tenure at VTS was to hire Kyle, a young MDiv graduate, former engineer, and writing coach, as the Digital Missioner. I made up his job title to reassure an anxious bishop that the position was worthy of ordination! In retrospect, we invented what has become a critical role in twenty-first century religious practice: a theologically trained chief technology officer. With extraordinary grace and patience, Kyle guided the transformation of an analog operation into a hub for collaborative digital formation.

As foot traffic into our physical Christian education resource center completely dried up, the Center for the Ministry of Teaching became known for eFormation, research, and teaching on faith formation in a connected, digital world. Our websites evolved from static information storage into subscription-based blog sites. A beloved print magazine became a digital newsletter, reaching more people for less money but in different ways. We invested in new audio-visual equipment to create compelling digital content. We hired student workers with skills none of us had ever imagined. We pushed the limits of existing

seminary policies and procedures, not out of willful disrespect but out of necessity. If our work were to be timely and responsive, we had to move more quickly than a legacy institution prefers.

I recognized that my leadership role was rapidly changing. I was still “the boss” and most often the only PhD in the room, but no one assumed I was the most knowledgeable member of the team. As colleagues at other seminaries described similar tectonic shifts in their roles, I remembered hearing the phrase, “in command, out of control,” that had been popularized in 2002 by U.S. Marine General Paul Van Riper. That was what I was experiencing at VTS and what I heard my colleagues describing at their own institutions. Futurist and founder of *Wired* magazine Kevin Kelly (1994) applied the concept to understand how complex, self-sustaining systems, like biological organisms and computer networks, function through decentralized, emergent processes rather than central control. Kevin Gaskell’s chapter, “In Command, Out of Control” in *Inspired Leadership* (2017, 157–72), and Margaret Wheatley’s extensive writing on leadership systems substantially anchored my lived experience in leadership science. I began to feel strangely relieved and more comfortable in my skin, so much so that in 2016, without institutional permission, I began describing the work of our growing constellation of ministry areas, as the Department of Lifelong Learning. My choice of nomenclature was based on the concept of lifelong learning I had been following closely since the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) report, *Learning to Be*, also referred to as the Faure Report (Faure et al. 1972). One commentator even called the concept a Copernican revolution (Hummel 1977), but the United States, and certainly the church, had been slow to adopt the framework.

Across theological education, people like me who had always functioned at the messy margins, as interlocutors between traditional higher education and practitioners on the ground, are now needed as curators and convenors, catalysts for action research and innovation. The competencies that many of us in lifelong learning developed naturally over decades have come to be described as new leadership literacies. According to Johansen (2017), effective leaders anticipate change through reflection, practice adaptive and low-risk experimentation, inspire without direct control, project influence virtually, and sustain contagious energy that empowers their organizations. When theological education, and North American Christianity more broadly, were in a spiral of decline, leaders in lifelong learning were rewarded for taking risks and performing at the edge of our

expertise. There were always more questions than answers—questions that are still relevant today—about audiences, demographics, access, and sustainability. How can we honor religious tradition and centuries-old practices of discipleship in a digitally-augmented landscape scarred by injustice and competition?

The pressure on leaders in lifelong learning to generate revenue and become self-sustaining continues to grow. This pressure led many of us to diversify our income streams to include cultivating a donor base, fee-for-service programming, subscription plans, and grant funding, adding financial acumen to our professional competencies. While generating revenue from multiple sources expands opportunities, it also brings political complexity. For example, VTS alumni are a core audience for our programming, and yet I cannot approach them directly for gifts because—understandably—the solicitation of alumni gifts is the responsibility of the development office. Another example: I am regularly praised by our senior administration for my grant-writing skills and told that our denominational seminary benefits enormously from the research and churchwide engagement my grants support. At the same time, I hear complaints about the strain large grants place on finite human resources in a small institution. Hiring new staff for a grant-funded project is exciting but requires tremendous care if the goal is for them to feel connected to the core mission and people of the institution. What are the ethical implications of hiring the equivalent of seasonal workers in structures still designed for permanent, full-time employees? It is easy for grant work to be siloed, disconnected from the life of the institutional community, and appear threatening to the existing faculty and staff. Even for faculty members who are excited about grant-funded lifelong learning initiatives, becoming involved in grant work outside of a standard course load can complicate annual contract negotiations. There are competing goods at play.

From Here to There

What then do success and sustainability look like? The instructions for my semi-annual departmental board report emphasize metrics over story, brevity over depth. In an over-saturated attention economy—a vast, predatory economic system that has evolved to extract and commodify human attention (Hayes 2025)—lifelong learning for ministry

must establish its distinctiveness in order to flourish. We have what we need to move forward with confidence.

Today, lifelong learning is an established developmental and practical framework—and a growing global field of study from which lifelong learning in ministry benefits and to which it contributes. For example, Theos (the leading religion and society think tank in the United Kingdom) mapped the opportunities and challenges of informal learning about religion and worldviews in the UK. Their October 2025 study, *Beyond the Classroom: Informal Religious Education in the UK*, found that when religious education is intentional, active, lifelong, and evolving, religious and belief literacy increases, social divisions decrease, and communities grow more compassionate and cohesive (Rich 2025). In North America we, in theological education, must make our voices heard. Our shared knowledge and proven practices incarnate hope well beyond accredited institutions and local congregations. We must make the case that our audience includes the public square.

Lifelong learning for ministry is the ongoing practice of culturally contextual theological reflection in community. It is an intentional commitment to accompany people across the life course (Elder, Johnson, and Crosnoe 2003) to foster learning in body, mind, and spirit that aligns their gifts with God's mission. Over the last twenty years, my vocational posture of generalist was transformed into a confident, interdisciplinary scholar-practitioner because I became immersed in a field that promotes holistic learning for individuals, communities, and systems.

Executive-level leaders in lifelong learning need to be guides, not content creators. We need a different response to chaos than control. Our priorities must build trust, capacity, and creativity across teams. Our foundational practice is listening. As Margaret Wheatley writes in *Finding Our Way*, "Listening moves us closer. It helps us become more whole, more healthy, more holy. Not listening creates fragmentation, is the root of all suffering" (2010, 277). At our best, we lead with curiosity and wonder. "You can't hate someone whose story you know" (Wheatley 2012, 96).

Lifelong learning teams are uniquely positioned to invite host institutions and organizations to engage spiritual practices that foster mutual sustainability. Sadly, many seminaries and faith-based organizations embrace corporate management practices that can emphasize efficient decision-making over discernment and business plans that rarely embrace the radical, counter-cultural dimensions of the Gospel. As such, doing always supersedes being, and the Divine

commandment to keep the sabbath is ignored. God has given us an unfolding, living, breathing system around us at every moment. In listening closely to creation and to the condition of peoples' lives, lifelong learning teams depend on creativity and imagination to offer "programs" to grow faith and form leaders. At our best, we let God be God, and foster practices that allow us as leaders, and our host institutions, to encounter uncertainty and not be gripped in paralyzing fear. By modeling leadership that values diversity, expresses joy and sorrow, and recognizes human finitude, we demonstrate the strength of interdependence and joyful resilience.

Ultimately, sustainability is not a science; it is an art that improves with practice. When COVID-19 abruptly closed churches just weeks before Easter, no one alive had experienced Easter under shutdown. Clergy understandably panicked. I knew my department had to respond. I invited our senior professor of liturgy to join me for a webinar, "Triduum Under Quarantine: Planning Holy Week and Easter Services That Honor Social Distancing." He was reluctant at first, both about the efficacy of an online conversation and recognizing the limits of his own experience. I assured my colleague that my team in Lifelong Learning knew how to present information and facilitate meaningful engagement online. I agreed that there were no easy answers, and argued for the pastoral responsibility to try. Registrations exceeded 1000 in just three days. We had to upgrade our Zoom license. The session was so well received that we offered a second program the next week on how to incorporate music in online worship. Five years later our newsletter subscriptions have doubled, and the VTS development office continues to receive gifts in gratitude for the guidance the Department of Lifelong Learning offered during Covid.

Conclusion

For lifelong learning in ministry to flourish—not only conceptually as a field, but also concretely as specific systems of organizational practice within and adjacent to established institutions—we must resist the temptation to contain the Spirit and over-define its boundaries. Lifelong learning in one seminary or judicatory or global network will not look exactly like any other, and yet we thrive together in the ecotone, some closer to the shore of formal theological education and others reaching islands and spaces of informal learning.

Leaders in lifelong learning for ministry must continue to establish an academic home in practical theology. This is where many of us already congregate in the academy, but even here we can be reflexively apologetic and marginalize ourselves, perhaps because much of our work takes place in informal and non-formal spaces. I have described myself as an accidental academic for too long. Let us together be bold and recognize that the hermeneutics of practical theological interpretation are at the core of our being. Practical theology welcomes interdisciplinarity and hybridization. The field needs our voices from the ecotone where sacred and secular naturally meet.

When we embrace our multidisciplinary roots and recognize the creativity and uncertainty inherent in accompanying human learning beings across the life course—always with a posture of existential and cultural humility—we will continue to participate with God in the redemption of the world. We will resist the seduction of certainty and hierarchies of power that fundamentally “other” and threaten imaginative, holistic ways of knowing and learning. Our commitments to listening and discernment, to honoring cultural contexts and human diversities, can help guide our schools and host institutions toward more faithful and responsive expressions of teaching and learning. And, yes, money follows meaning when authenticity and integrity inform our work.

At its best, lifelong learning for ministry incarnates wonder and excavates hope by immersing individuals and communities in trusted experiences of love in which all bodies, minds, and spirits can engage in life-long, life-wide, and life-deep learning.

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