

Introduction

Exploring the Ecotone

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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.

References

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