

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).