

Portraits of Lifelong Learners

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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?

