

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

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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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