

Reimagining Information Literacy for Parish Clergy and Lifelong Learners

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

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

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

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

Information Literacy and Information Fluency

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Lifelong Learning for Ministry

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

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

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

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

Avenues and Obstacles to Information Fluency Education within Lifelong Learning

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Recommendations for Lifelong Learning Programs

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Ongoing Challenges

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

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

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

Conclusion

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

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