CHAPTER 18

Seeking Information Mastery in Multivocational Ministry

> *Pastor Sondra told us she thought one of the "greatest resources" she received in her seminary education "was how to use information, how to find it, and how to discern the information," especially when she was preparing a sermon.*
>
> – Eileen Campbell-Reed (2021, 46)

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When I read this sentence in *Pastoral Imagination* by Eileen Campbell-Reed, I was struck by the fact that the "greatest resource" was learning about information and not learning information or facts. It was not what I was expecting. Learning to find true information can feed us and help us to continually learn. The world we live in is in constant flux. Anyone called to ministry today can expect to face ever-new and evolving challenges. To respond to these challenges, those in ministry must be continual learners. Programs that prepare students for ministry are important, and learning must continue beyond the institutions that house these programs. Effective ministry requires continual learning and personal development. It requires that those in ministry be able to find, analyze, and apply the information they need to respond to those they serve and to the world in general.

In this chapter, I begin by adopting a model of learning by Hubert Dreyfus and discussing the importance of continual learning to achieve mastery in an area. I then turn to the need to find time for learning. Learning is too important to allow the urgent to displace it. I then discuss how to determine what information is needed, where to find it, and how to evaluate it. I then invite the reader to share what is learned with their congregations, ministry colleagues, and community. Such collaboration brings one in contact with diverse voices, promoting innovation and allowing for creativity in thought and practice. Through careful and efficient research and collaboration with others, multivocational ministers can continue their learning in ways that support effective ministry.

A Model of Learning

My father installed air-conditioning equipment in large hotels and businesses. He learned his trade at a technical college. His two-year degree taught him not only the practical "how-to" but also the "why" so that he could safely do what he was taught to do. His work history included the usual steps of apprenticeship, journeyman, and master in his profession. I remember once being at the mall with my father. A man walked up to him. The man, who worked for a competing company, asked my father for advice on how to install an air-conditioning unit. Because of my father's education, experience, and continued reading on the subject, he was able to offer an innovative solution to his friend's problem.

This everyday example illustrates an important model of learning. Hubert Dreyfus, in his book *On the Internet* (2009, 27), described a process in which "a student learns by means of instruction, practice, and, finally, apprenticeship, to become an expert in some particular domain and in everyday life and what more is required for one to become a master." Dreyfus named six stages to this learning process: 1) Novice, 2) Advanced Beginner, 3) Competence, 4) Proficiency, 5) Expertise, and 6) Mastery.

In the *Novice* stage, the student learns the mechanics of the task and "is then given rules for determining actions on the basis of these features, like a computer following a program" (Dreyfus 2009, 27). The student also needs to understand "the context in which that information makes sense" (28).

In the *Advanced Beginner* stage, the student begins to learn what the relevant contexts are and "to attempt to use the maxims that have been given" (29).

In the *Competence* stage, the student becomes overwhelmed by the number of different situations and struggles to know which skill to use for each situation. Many create general plans for how to respond to various situations, but it is common for the learner to feel uncertainty in deciding which plan to use for a particular situation. The student must figure out which plan is appropriate given the details of the case (30–34).

According to Dreyfus, "*Proficiency* seems to develop if, and only if, experience is assimilated in this embodied, atheoretical way. Only then do intuitive reactions replace reasoned responses" (emphasis added).

Concerning the *Expertise* stage, Dreyfus wrote, "The ability to make more subtle and refined discriminations is what distinguishes the expert from the proficient performer" (35). A variety of experiences "allows the immediate intuitive situational response that is characteristic of expertise" (36).

In the *Mastery* stage, the student desires to go beyond being an expert. "The future master must be willing and able, in certain situations, to override the perspective that as an expert performer he intuitively experiences" (41). In a sense, the student reaches an innovative capacity.

Dreyfus's model shows the need for continuing education for ministry. Looking at the example of my father, his professional training led him through a learning process of progressing from novice, advanced beginner, and competence to eventually achieving proficiency, expertise, and mastery. His trade's levels of certification of apprenticeship, journeyman, and master included not only different experiences but also supervisors to help him learn about different situations and to integrate different types of installations depending on the building. For my father to achieve mastery and offer an innovative solution to his friend, my father, as a foreman who no longer had a supervisor on location, needed to find other sources of information, such as continued reading (one of his favorite magazines was *Popular Science*) in order to see situations from different perspectives.

Many multivocational ministers learn in context much as some air-conditioning installers learn their trade through doing and working with a supervisor. My father was able to exhibit mastery to "override the perspective" and present an innovative solution to his

friend's problem. The friend then was able to grow in his learning by talking with my father, who served as a temporary mentor. Continual learning on the part of the friend was an important part of doing the job well and helped him in growing toward his own mastery of the trade. My father's friend was not afraid to seek more information, even from someone who worked for a competitor, in order to learn how to deal with a new situation. Though the friend might not be at the mastery level, he at least could create another plan to add to his collection while in the competence stage. In a similar way, continual learning is important for those in multivocational ministry. When a new situation arises, a multivocational minister will want to seek more information not only to find a solution to a particular problem or situation but also to develop more mastery that can be applied to other situations.

Continual education is important for multivocational ministers no matter their educational background. For example, Christian Scharen, in his chapter in *For Life Abundant*, modified Dreyfus's learning model for seminary education. In seminary, a student may grow through the novice and advanced beginner stages. At these stages, students learn theories and philosophies of the subjects included in the curriculum and how to use them in particular situations. Understanding theories and applications gives students background to later make decisions that may go beyond what has been taught in seminary. This then becomes the basis for learning and integrating new situations and knowledge into practical skills. Applying Dreyfus's stages to ministry, Scharen (2008, 277) observed that "the competent stage occurs during the period when students are making their transition from seminary into full-time leadership in congregational life." Multivocational pastors who have attended seminary are, of course, not transitioning to full-time leadership in a congregation but to many part-time roles, each of which may be full-time in terms of expectations of the job or of others.

In the development of mastery, graduation from seminary or multiple pathways of theological education is not the end of learning. Classroom theological education is a process of helping students gain foundational knowledge and understanding that will feed later growth. Thus, Scharen (2008, 277) stated that the transition from competence to proficiency would take place four to six years after finishing seminary. The student, now minister, still has several years of learning before achieving mastery. Scharen also mentioned that a change to new contexts can move a person backwards in skill profi-

ciency (274). The timeline that Scharen suggested for later stages can apply to all multivocational ministers no matter their educational pathway. Movement through Dreyfus's stages can take longer than some may expect. Thus, continual education is important for all multivocational ministers.

Making Time for Learning

One of the biggest challenges for anyone in ministry is finding time. Our lives are busy. We do not have the time to spend seeking more or better information. We barely have time to deal with the many vocations of our life. There is seemingly no time to add learning and educational growth to our schedule or to stop, learn, and reflect. However, the easiest way to find information may not provide the best information for what we need.

It would seem, at first glance, that it is easier than ever to find information. With virtual home assistants and chatbots becoming ubiquitous, information is available on almost any topic. Speak a question aloud and receive an instant answer. Type in a chatbox, and artificial intelligence finds the meaning of an array of medical symptoms, for example. Even in areas such as theology and biblical studies, a simple Google search will find many websites that provide quick and easy answers. Those involved in multivocational ministry may be tempted to go with such apparently time-saving solutions to meet their information needs. But discovering good and reliable answers for ministry questions takes a bit more work. One must know what kind of information one is looking for. And finding that information requires digging deeper than easy answers and necessitates critical thinking skills to evaluate it.

Most of us turn to search engines when we seek information. This may result in an overwhelming number of hits. In a 2016 report, *How Today's Graduates Continue to Learn Once They Complete College*, Alison Head told the story of what one graduate did to find out information.

> Without a second thought, she grabbed her iPad, did a Google search, and visited the sites she usually frequented, like YouTube, Pinterest, and Hipmunk. She also turned to a trusted friend for advice. These are the tools for lifelong learning in the 21st century, a flood of Internet-

> and human-mediated sources that help recent graduates solve basic to complex information problems. (Head 2016, 2)

Continuing her analysis of information gathering, Head (2016, 32) commented on the increased volume of information available today and the time necessary to wade through this information to get what is desired. Learning sources for personal life included search engines (89%), friends (79%), social networking (79%), family (77%), news (72%), books (70%), and videos (67%) (Head 2016, 23). Sources of workplace related information included coworkers (84%), search engines (83%), supervisor/boss (79%), books (51%), and professional conferences (49%). Friends and family fall lower on the scale for workplace information gathering. In both settings, books are still considered a source of information. While seminary students and multivocational pastors may be older and have more life experience than the undergraduate students in this report, their results would likely be similar. I have found, in my conversations with seminary students, that they also normally use search engines and people for finding information.

There is an ever-increasing number of sources a person needs to sort through to get accurate and reliable information, and time is at a premium for those in multivocational ministry. Most seminary students have had information literacy courses or instruction. These sessions, geared to the novice, foster skill development in finding information. Because the multivocational minister may not have developed the skill further than the advanced beginner stage, searching may still not be intuitive. Adding to the difficulty for multivocational pastors who have completed their formal training is the fact that research databases that students learn to use for their academic work, such as exegesis papers and research in church history and theology, are sometimes no longer available to them. Thus, finding information can be a daunting task. Those in ministry may not find the time to start such research or make a habit of doing thorough research on a regular basis.

Some pastors might think, "all I really need to know about ministry I learned in seminary." This attitude on the part of the seminary-trained pastor indicates that, once they acquire their degree, the pastor may think that they will have the tools and knowledge for ministry. I have heard students anticipating graduation from seminary talking as if they will not need any more education. While it may be true that they do not need any more advanced degrees, it does

not follow that they should stop learning. Other pastors, who learned through an apprenticeship model, may feel that once they have completed their apprenticeships, they no longer need to learn anything anymore. However, the world changes and so must those in ministry. Learning to use a slide rule to solve complicated calculations may have been adequate in the past, but to think that such knowledge is enough—or even necessary—appears absurd in our day when we perform mathematical calculations on our phones.

Continued learning is essential because formal theological education and apprenticeships are just the beginning of learning and growth to mastery, taking the learner from the novice to advanced beginner or competence stage as seen in Dreyfus's model. For those who were seminary educated, it is less and less true that seminary education covers all the subjects necessary for ministry. As seminary curricula become shorter and shorter, some subjects necessarily appear only as footnotes in courses. Even courses in core subjects merely introduce students to their subject matter. In the same way, those who have learned through an apprenticeship model may assume that all subjects and situations have been learned, since they are now a pastor. This is not the case. Learning beyond the basics is essential for growth to mastery.

Even if we realize that we need to learn and that finding good information for learning takes time, it may still be difficult to make time for learning. Early stages of novice, advanced beginner, and competence may take more time, but, with practice, the skills involved in finding reliable information will be easier to apply each time. As stages are reached, and with practice, the learner will take less time to find information. In the proficiency stage, for example, the learner has come to trust favorite sites, as we saw in Head's story of the woman doing iPad searches. However we judge her favorite sites of quality information, this graduate has decided that the sites do provide answers to her questions and quickly goes to them when they appear in her results. Time has been saved.

Finding Reliable Information

There are a number of ways to continue growth toward mastery of finding reliable information for ministry. A first step in the search for information is to sit down and think through just what kind of

information one is looking for. Is it in preparation for a sermon and looking for quality materials to help interpret the Bible text? Sometimes a member of the congregation may raise a theological question or need help in understanding a particular situation through a theological lens. Perhaps the search is for information on pastoral ministry. Second, after deciding on what kind of information is needed, it is helpful to jot down some keywords that help to identify the topic. Synonyms or different ways of saying something may produce different results. Communion, Eucharist, and Lord's Supper are three different ways of naming a particular Christian ritual. Noting that these three terms may be used in different webpages is helpful in finding reliable results. Third, make a list of colleagues, mentors, former teachers and supervisors, and others who may be able to guide the search for information. Who can point the way to key information? Who might mentor? My father's friend recognized at the mall that there was an opportunity to learn more. Who might help to set up situations in which contextual learning can take place? Are there workshops available? Are there resources, such as libraries and librarians, that may be of help? By taking time to ask a few questions like these, the search can be focused and time is saved. Keeping a list of possible resources will help in future seeking.

The internet is not the only source of information, but it is one source we all use. So how can we use it most wisely? The graduate who grabbed her iPad is like most in the competence stage. She has a plan for looking for information. Search engines and friends are her two top resources. Hopefully, she has learned how to evaluate the hits that would be most helpful and weed out those that are biased or irrelevant. With this skill, she can quickly scan the results for quality, relevance, and truth, avoiding disinformation (see Owens, chapter 13 in this volume). Once we understand how to evaluate search results on the internet, time becomes less of a problem. For example, I talked with a student who heard about Brené Brown and was curious to know more about her. He googled "Brené Brown" and received a number of hits. The next step was to evaluate which of the hits to examine first. I suggested that the best way to find out what Brené Brown says is to hear what she says about herself. The link to Brown's website was the first site we looked at. Information about Brown and her views were on her site. Some of the other distracting search results included advertisements for Brown's books and blogs quoting her work. Some of the other sites may be interesting but would be a rabbit hole in finding good information quickly.

Brown's website provided a podcast she had done explaining some of her main points. Honing in on the needed information and ignoring extraneous information can save time in searching.

In considering the use of search engines, it is important to note that a search engine tailors its results to each enquirer; the selection of links the search engine lists will be different for each searcher. This occurs because search engines use algorithms to analyze an individual's search habits, including which sites an individual user has visited in the past. As the search engine gathers more and more information about a particular user, software enables the computer to predict what kind of information each searcher wants to see. In a sense, the more one searches, the more the artificial intelligence learns what one looks for. For example, I live in Dubuque, Iowa. Recently I was searching for a particular restaurant in Dubuque. The search box finished my search term by offering the restaurant name then adding "Dubuque." The search engine had learned that I often look for this restaurant. The restaurant also appeared at the top of my search results. This may be helpful in terms of time saved, but it may not increase the usefulness of searching for more quality information. Some search engines do not gather information as much as others. For example, at the time of this writing, Duck Duck Go advertised on its search page, "We don't store your personal information. Ever." They differentiate themselves from other search engines by promising privacy in searching. Google also has a privacy setting enabling Private Google, which uses a different kind of algorithm.

The machine learning involved in some of the algorithms may simply produce confirmation bias, or verification for what we already think. For example, if I am searching for information about gun violence and the search engine had concluded from my search history that I supported greater gun control measures, the search engine would provide links to sites that reinforce this view. On the other hand, if I am a staunch defender of free and uncontrolled gun ownership and have a history of reading websites that criticize any form of gun control legislation, then the search engine will provide links that reinforce this view. This is one of the reasons our nation, as well as our churches, has become so polarized. Information sources feed us what we want to hear. It becomes harder for us to find information on both sides of an issue when we have trained artificial intelligence with a particular viewpoint. Another example can be found in the book *Race After Technology*. In it, Ruha Benjamin posits that technology reinforces White supremacy.

> Such findings demonstrate what I call 'the New Jim Code': the employment of new technologies that reflect and reproduce existing inequities but that are promoted and perceived as more objective or progressive than the discriminatory systems of a previous era. (Benjamin 2019, 5)

Whether you agree with Benjamin or not, the evidence provided in her book shows an interesting correlation with search results that show bias. In short, looking for information by "just googling it" or asking Siri or Alexa can produce biased information. Given the way search engines work, it is easy to see how they could easily reinforce racism and bias or a one-sided view of a topic. We stunt growth from the competence stage to proficiency when we limit our information through algorithmic bias.

How can one counter this search bias? It is probably not possible to avoid it completely, but it is possible to be wary of search results and to look for other views. Since search engines can pick up on "trigger words" used by supporters of various positions, it can be helpful to find non-trigger synonyms to search instead. It also helps to go beyond the first page of hits. Seeking out differing voices, both online and in other resources, can broaden one's perspective. Books, articles, blogs, and podcasts may provide guidance and new ideas as well as different perspectives. New voices challenge us and open us to new ways of thinking, sparking new ideas. Outside input can also help us to pivot quickly when the context changes by teaching us new plans for new situations, helping us move from competence to proficiency to expertise. We no longer try to fit a particular plan to a new situation but can intuitively respond to the new situation.

So, there are ways to try to counter the inbuilt bias of search engines. But one should also go beyond search engines to gather information online. A growing number of open access (OA) academic articles and books (such as this one) are available via reliable sources. Seminary libraries have curated lists of these as well as other freely available articles. These lists have usually been vetted by the seminary librarian and may be trusted. Most seminary librarians and faculty members are happy to help in finding good, academically sound sources on the internet. Many seminaries also allow pastors to access library resources. Public libraries and denominational agencies and offices also provide good print and online resources.

The graduate who grabbed the iPad to find information also sought the advice of a trusted friend. Like a trusted website, a trusted

friend can provide good information. When seeking recommendations or advice from friends, we often think about who would give us the best information. For example, if I am looking for a good restaurant, I would probably ask someone who has similar tastes to mine. If I am looking for a contractor, I would ask a friend who just had work done on their house. In my father's case, his friend sought his advice to figure out the best way to install the air-conditioning unit in a challenging situation. In a similar way, when looking for information, we could ask a friend or an expert in the relevant area, perhaps a colleague or former professor or mentor.

"Trustworthy" and "knowledgeable" are two very important criteria for evaluating a source of information, whether this is a website, a friend, a book, or an article. In determining whether a source of information is trustworthy, we need to know what we believe and why we believe it. Some of this is learned through studies in theological doctrine and biblical studies or in apprenticeship programs with a mentor or supervisor. Our core theology is our foundational belief and becomes important in discerning whether information is helpful to us. When we learn new information, we balance the new information with the foundational beliefs that we have. If the new understanding is coherent with those foundational beliefs, then it would make sense to incorporate the new learning into our lives. If the new understanding is not coherent, then the question is whether to discard the new learning as false or to modify our foundational beliefs or, even more drastically, to decide our foundational beliefs are wrong. For example, diversity, equity, and inclusion are currently important issues in many churches and communities. Whether the diversity concerns race or gender identification, emotions may run high. When seeking relevant information, it is important to consider one's core theology in evaluating information discovered in the search. This will help to steady us in looking at important issues.

Mentoring is another source of growth in both knowledge and wisdom as one moves through the stages toward mastery (see Fain, chapter 12 in this volume). Mentorships may be formal relationships with someone who will guide and advise as needed. The mentor can provide not only "how-to" information but answer the questions of "why." The mentor can teach and demonstrate. Colleagues may serve as mentors by becoming conversation partners in new or challenging situations, perhaps sharing experience in similar circumstances. Colleagues may offer insight or be a listening ear or ask the right questions to help with creative ideas or solutions.

Becoming Both Learner and Teacher

There is a sense in which we are both learners and teachers as we travel together along Dreyfus's stages of growing in our skills and abilities. Multivocational ministers may lack time and perhaps feel marginalized for not being full-time in ministry. Yet working collaboratively with others who are similar but different not only helps with a sense of belonging but also sharpens thinking and perspective. Collaboration can also help in our motivation to keep learning. Weekly groups to study the lectionary text or to test out preaching ideas can be good sources of information and insight. Book clubs, writing groups, and beer and theology groups can be good places for discussion and learning and may be excellent means of encouraging us to learn and think and see things from a different perspective. It may increase our "ability to make more subtle and refined discriminations" (Dreyfus 2009, 35) and thus move us to the expertise stage.

Finding ways to implement "continuous improvement"—an idea taken from business—can help us learn new things to apply in ministry situations. Evaluating the congregation on a regular basis may reveal, for example, that the Sunday School program is no longer helping students learn. Observation might show that the students are restless during sessions and that there are increased absences. Evaluation may point out why the program is not helping students learn. This may be a situation when more information is needed to determine why the usual way of dealing with a situation is not working and what improvement is needed. Figuring out what kind of information is needed, deciding how to find the information, and using appropriate researching skills will help one advance through the stages of learning. Our search to find reliable information to improve the program may include looking at successful Sunday School programs and seeing why they do what they do. It may also involve others in the congregation or in churches nearby. Perhaps we may bring in experts in childhood education (temporary mentors) or read a book with others (collaboration with colleagues). Evaluation and looking at the context may point to a need for incremental change or a major change in the Sunday School program. Striving for continuous improvement also fosters growth in skill and knowledge toward mastery in multivocational ministry.

Along a similar line, one can look for opportunities to commit oneself to learning in new areas. I often submit proposals for pro-

fessional development sessions based on what I want to learn rather than what I already know. I find that this helps me do research on something that is important to me. It motivates me to study and to learn. Some ministers offer to lead sessions at professional conferences; others may lead an Advent or Lenten study to encourage their own continued learning. Preaching a series on a particular topic may provide the same kind of motivation. As we are both learners and instructors, it is important to share what we have learned. Information and skills become more embedded in our lives when we share, promoting growth from expertise to mastery.

I opened this chapter with a quote from Pastor Sondra, who considered one of her greatest resources learning to find information. This skill was not only for ministry-related study. Later, Campbell-Reed observed,

> Learning about how to use resources went beyond preaching and teaching. She [Sondra] says her "personal study" and "personal devotion time" became essential to nourishing her well-being as a minister. Referring to her spiritual nourishment, she says, "You know, I can go eat, too, and I can eat well." (Campbell-Reed 2021, 46)

Continually learning and finding reliable information are not just for works of ministry but also for feeding our souls. We are whole people when we make sure that we are well-fed, not just for mastery of multivocational ministry but also for our own spiritual growth and formation.

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