

Theological Reflection from a Protestant Canadian Context

Clickable Table of Contents

Introduction	2
With All Your Heart, Soul and Mind: Deepening Theological Reflection	6
Where is God?.....	15
Theological Field Education and Leaving Christendom: Initial Reflections	24
Systemic Injustice of Heterosexism in Theological Education.....	34
“We Need To Be Included and Involved --- Not Forgotten or Taken For Granted!”	44

Theological Reflection from a Protestant Canadian Context

Introduction

Abigail Johnson

Director of Field Education, Emmanuel College, Toronto

Theological field education is a contextual discipline, therefore I am pleased to introduce three articles written by theological field educators in the Canadian context. This is something of an achievement for two reasons. First, as field educators in general, it is very difficult to write. There are many reasons for this and I will suggest two, as they are relevant to the enterprise of theological field education and perhaps the theological enterprise as a whole.

Field educators are often designated as administrators of a program with little expectation of research and publication. This has been detrimental to the discipline of theological field education because much rich experiential learning and qualitative research is being lost. As a professional association (Association for Theological Field Education ATFE), we are poorer for the lack of a corpus of knowledge that can inform, challenge, shape and reshape our discipline. This is also detrimental to theological education as a whole because field education often stands as a unique androgogical enterprise in contextual and experiential learning. There is much that theological field education can contribute to the teaching and learning within theological education as a whole.

In addition, positions as theological field educators are often only part of a full time position that combines areas such as pastoral studies or dean/director of basic degree studies. Competing time commitments, professional needs and discipline conflicts place research and writing within field education on a back burner.

A second reason for the great achievement of these three articles is that it is a contribution within a Canadian context. As Canadians, we perhaps comprise 10% of the North American population of theological field educators. Yet we hold a place of pride within ATFE both in joining colleagues nationally and somewhat internationally, and in holding distinct a sense of our Canadian history, geography and polity. The Canadian context has shaped us as individuals, as a society, and certainly informs our work in the discipline of contextual education and ministry.

Theological Reflection from a Protestant Canadian Context

Some of our identity is based in a conflict about that very identity. Publisher, Conrad Black, has stated that “Canada enters the millennium with no real rationale as a country. . . . Canada is the only substantial country in the world with no cultural, linguistic, or tribal homogeneity nor any distinct revolutionary, ideological, or geopolitical tradition to give it an organizing principle.”¹ Prolific writer, Pierre Burton, who has devoted his life to lifting up Canadian history, culture and identity, would disagree. “We *have* a distinct identity . . . I’ve been exploring that identity for most of my career.”²

One of the key aspects that have shaped our identity as Canadians is our geography. We are a people stretched from sea to sea with a vast northern area inhospitable except to the hardiest aboriginal people. We are people of maritime, prairies, mountains, urban, rural, diversity of language and culture. Northrop Frye, Canada’s greatest literary critic, has said, “The question of Canadian identity, so far as it affects the creative imagination, is not a “Canadian” question at all, but a regional question.”³ Regions have created intense communities, steeped in local history and heritage, rich in pride and distinctness. However, regionalism has often fractured our attempts at unity and has created tension in federal politics.

Part of our struggle within Canadian history has been bringing unity to diversity. Building a national railway system from one end of the country to another was a significant political achievement. Tensions between unity and diversity have forced conversation with one another that have shaped our sense of being multicultural. One of our youngest Prime Minister’s, Joe Clark, recognized the richness of our diversity when he said, “In an immense country, you live on a local scale. Governments make the nation work by recognizing that we are fundamentally a community of communities.”⁴ In union with a regional diversity, we have intentionally embraced cultural diversity. With all its aches and pains, stretches and strains, Canada has embraced a notion of multiculturalism. Denise Chong, a Canadian-born economist of Chinese heritage suggests that “Canadian citizenship recognizes differences. It praises diversity. It is what we as Canadians choose to have in common with each other. It is a bridge between those who left something to make a new home here and those born here.”⁵

¹ Conrad Black in John Robert Colombo’s *Famous Lasting Words: Great Canadian Quotations*. Douglas and McIntyre (Vancouver/Toronto) 2000, p. 262.

² Pierre Burton in Desmond Morton and Morton Weinfeld’s *Who Speaks for Canada: Words that Shape a Country*. McClelland and Stewart Inc. (Toronto ON) 1998, p. 284.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 234

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 268

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 330

Theological Reflection from a Protestant Canadian Context

Whether we can agree on a definition of Canadian identity or whether we hold fast to an illusory dream of identity, we theological field educators in the Canadian context believe we bring something distinct to the field education conversation. We gather as a Canadian Caucus of Theological Field Educators (CCATFE) to celebrate, support and challenge one another to greater achievements in an educational enterprise of which we are proud. These three articles are an achievement both because, as field educators, we have written about our experiences and because they lift up insights arising from our Canadian context. This does not mean that there is little here to inform the larger discipline of theological field education or the larger theological education enterprise. On the contrary, the questions raised, challenges offered and insights gleaned make a substantial contribution to our discipline.

To begin the process, I look at the task of theological reflection. Although theological field education is seen as the place where students apply theory or gain ministry skills or assess competency, I strongly believe that the task of the field educator is to instill a love for and discipline of theological reflection. Looking at theory and practice, I offer concrete suggestions for deepening the process of theological reflection. Realizing that theological reflection is an art, it is hard to become prescriptive or pedantic about engaging a creative process. Yet it is possible to approach the teaching task in such a way that students catch a glimpse of theological reflection as a spiritual discipline and a habit of the heart.

Stuart Macdonald challenges us to view our context with new eyes as he invites us to take seriously leaving Christendom. Or perhaps Christendom has already left us and we are still in denial as more and more congregations are dwindling. Various fix-it solutions are being offered in an attempt to shore up a church structure that may be in the process of dying. In encouraging us to look at our context realistically, Macdonald discusses the pressures this puts on field education by looking at placements, assessment, learning goals and competence. There are implications for how theological colleges have conversation with judicatories and what expectations the church has for theological education. Macdonald leaves us with two pressing questions with which we, as field educators need to engage one another. Let us pick up the challenge to face our challenging context and begin to converse about the implications for contextual learning.

Macdonald invites us into a renewed examination of our context whereas third author, Shelley Davis Finson, draws us further into contextual questions that not only bring us face-to-face with often-termed “invisible” students but also challenge us to make justice and love a concrete reality for lesbian, gay and bisexual students. Finson clearly examines the way that theological schools have discriminated against students through process, policy, curriculum and a conspiracy of silence. From that place of challenge, Finson offers us concrete

Theological Reflection from a Protestant Canadian Context

possibilities for transformation throughout the whole theological education enterprise.

I commend these articles to your reflection as theological field educators in the ongoing challenge of contextual education for ministry. They are a gift from a Canadian context that offers diversity in perspective yet unity in a desire for further reflection on our discipline. While they arise from a particular context, they raise questions that have a larger application. May they inspire further conversation in the days ahead.

Theological Reflection from a Protestant Canadian Context

With All Your Heart, Soul and Mind: Deepening Theological Reflection

Abigail Johnson

Introduction

Within the discipline of Theological Field Education, theological reflection lies at the heart of practice and process. It is an essential component of Field Education programs raising them above simply the practice of ministry skills to the praxis of reflection upon ministry issues in conversation with theology, Bible, history and pastoral studies.

Theological reflection is not only an important component of Field Education as a course of study, it is also an essential life-long ministry skill and spiritual discipline. Theological reflection as a practice within Field Education is essential because it:

- Helps to make connections between faith and life
- Develops an understanding of pastoral identity
- Encourages clarity of ministerial role distinct from other helping professions
- Becomes a 'habit of the heart' or spiritual discipline
- Encourages distinction of different 'theological worlds,' ours and others
- Increases the ability to hear implicit theology in events and conversations.

Having said that, I find the task of encouraging student practitioners to theologically reflect and to deepen their theological reflection is challenging.

Some students find the open-ended explorative process frightening as they look for absolute pastoral answers and theological surety. Some students approach theological reflection as a course requirement that becomes redundant after the course ends. Some find the process to be invigorating and stimulating yet, like an exercise program, discover that it is hard to maintain the discipline to exercise even though we know it is good for us. While it is not possible to develop prescriptive methods that assure the outcome of theological reflection, there are ways to encourage students to dig a little deeper and find that the process of reflection is part of their journey with God. In this article, I will outline aspects of the process of theological reflection and suggest some ways to deepen that reflection.

Theological Reflection in Theory

Theological reflection is not new. In one sense, it is practised in each sermon when the scripture text is reflected upon in light of the contexts and experiences

Theological Reflection from a Protestant Canadian Context

facing a particular faith community in a particular moment in time. While there is no written history of the practice of theological reflection at present⁶, I suggest that the practice of action and reflection as a theological process is ancient. Jesus embarked on this practice as he reflected on the daily lives of fisher folk and villagers, farmers and tax collectors. He combined this reflection with scripture, tradition and reason as he drew people closer to God. In addition, he reflected on his own actions and experiences in light of his sense of relationship with God and others. As a result, there were times when Jesus found himself at odds with the received tradition of his day. At one point, a woman challenged Jesus to change his theological position. Typically, he pushed at traditional theological understanding in order to bring his message of God's love as liberating news to many who felt rejected and ostracized by their tradition. Consequently, the received tradition of the Christian church arose as the fruit of theological reflection. This was a process that continued in the early Christian church as Jesus' followers tried to make sense of their leader's crucifixion and resurrection in light of their hopes for a valiant, triumphant liberator.

The Protestant tradition continued this practice of action-reflection. Luther posted his ninety-five theses in order to engage in a reflective conversation with others. He was engaging in an action-reflection process by drawing on his experiences of the church as well as the politics of his day. Although Luther's original intention was not to start another church, the outcome of his theological reflection created an ethos of a protesting church, a reforming protest from within—a process of theological reflection.

While the practice of theological reflection is not new, charting this practice as a theological and theoretical method is distinctly new. With his text *Blessed Rage For Order*⁷, theologian David Tracy critically reflects on contemporary theologies through the lens of what he names a modern plural and secular world. Finding these various theologies lacking in the face of modern questions, Tracy proposes a revisionist model which attempts a correlation between the two sources for theology: common human experience and Christian texts. He offers five theses for a revisionist model, as follows:

1. Two principal sources for theology are Christian texts and common human experience and language.
2. The theological task will involve a critical correlation of the results of investigating these two sources.

⁶ While not a history as such, Robert L. Kinast, *What are they Saying about Theological Reflection?* Paulist Press, New York, 2000, is a comprehensive survey of theological reflection.

⁷ David Tracy, *Blessed Rage For Order: The New Pluralism in Theology*. (Minnesota: The Seabury Press, 1975).

Theological Reflection from a Protestant Canadian Context

3. A principal method of investigating common human experience and language can be described as a phenomenology of the 'religious dimension' present in everyday and scientific experience as well as language.
4. A principal method for investigating Christian texts is an historical and hermeneutical investigation of these texts.
5. To determine the truth status of the results of one's investigation into the meaning of both common human experience and Christian texts, the theological should employ an explicitly transcendental or metaphysical mode of reflection.

The first two theses follow one from another. If the two principal sources for theology are common human experience and Christian texts, then it follows that a critical correlation of these two sources needs to take place.

In thesis three, Tracy wrestles with the nature of common human experience. He is concerned with continuing a search in "contemporary theology for an adequate expression of the religious dimension of our common experience and language."⁸ Tracy uses the philosophical term "limit" to examine the religious dimension of human experience. By limit, Tracy refers to situations of angst and mortality, as well as situations of intense joy and ecstatic expression. With this definition, it becomes only the extraordinary that is worthy of the term "religious." It is this limit analysis that Tracy uses to:

suggest how religion continues to operate in our common secular lives as an authentic disclosure which both bespeaks certain inevitable limits—to our lives and manifests some final reality which functions as a trustworthy limit—of life itself.⁹

While I appreciate Tracy's quest to work within a philosophical discipline to describe his thesis, rather than limiting religious experience to the extraordinary, I want to expand the horizon of "religious" to include all experiences of life. The ordinary *is* extraordinary. That we live, breathe, walk and talk, think and laugh, deduce and create, and daily find the courage to continue living the ordinary life is totally extraordinary.

My desire to expand horizons of religious experience in our everyday lives relates to my starting point for theological reflection: current experience. Unlike Tracy, I would suggest that experiential food for theological reflection is not limited to a crisis event that raises questions of our mortality, or an ecstatic event that reveals grace. I suggest it is also seemingly mundane actions such as caring for a family: washing clothes, preparing daily meals, being a listening presence,

⁸ Ibid., 48.

⁹ Ibid., 109.

Theological Reflection from a Protestant Canadian Context

cleaning and re-cleaning in an endless cycle. It is being a bus driver with the integrity of being present for each person in a routine bus route, driven over and over again. It is the reflective ability to search for the religious, or in other words, to declare the extraordinary nature of ordinary day-to-day living that is the theological task.

As theses four and five outline, Christian texts are the foundation of Christian tradition, and therefore provide the dialogue partner with human experience. This dialogue takes place as a critical correlation between these two different expressions. Tracy addresses the task of critical correlation most clearly in his anticipatory suggestions toward praxis for a revisionist theory. As Tracy suggests, praxis is "the critical relationship between theory and practice whereby each is dialectically influenced and transformed by the other."¹⁰ The sense of the possibility of mutual transformation is the essence of theological reflection. It is not possible to predict the outcome. Perhaps our pastoral actions will change. Alternatively, perhaps our theological constructions will be deconstructed and reconstructed.

When Tracy was writing in 1975, he found liberal and liberation theologies, or as he called them eschatological theologies, lacking in their ability to critically reflect on the very Christian symbols that inform praxis. In addition, Tracy challenged the praxis disciplines to develop a critical social theory through interdisciplinary conversations drawing on the theory and disciplines of theologies and social sciences. I believe Clodovis Boff took up that challenge in 1987.¹¹ Boff examined the relationship between theology and social sciences, theology and sacred scripture, and theology and praxis. He looked at the construction of a theoretical platform for theological, pastoral and political practice.

Boff worked in an environment that called for a radical political shift. While he did not reject a pastoral approach, he sought an horizon that was wider and more radical, not simply a practice of faith.

I wish to extend (them) throughout the spectrum of the praxis of faith, with emphasis on the political practice of faith . . . a Christian practice of politics.¹²

Boff engaged in an action-reflection process called liberation theology, where "liberation is a kind of 'horizon' against which the whole tradition of the faith is to be read."¹³ He offered the challenge of reflecting on how our declared theology

¹⁰ Ibid., 204.

¹¹ Clodovis Boff, *Theology and Praxis: Epistemological Foundations* (New York: Orbis Books, 1987).

¹² Ibid., 4.

¹³ Ibid., xxix.

Theological Reflection from a Protestant Canadian Context

operates in practice, or what we believe is lived in how we behave. The integration of belief and behaviour becomes for Boff a "normative" theology.

What is called for . . . is a confrontation of stated intent with actual results, and then the application of the outcome of this confrontation as point of departure for the construction of a "normative" theology.¹⁴

In over two hundred pages of dense theological and philosophical language, Boff describes the theoretical foundations for a liberation theology. Even though it is exciting and liberating reading, it does not prove to be a useful textbook for most people who seek to engage in theological reflection as a daily practice.

James and Evelyn Whitehead agree with the theoretical proposal that theology is the correlation of Christian texts with common human experience. But they have a concern that "ambiguity and disagreement abound concerning the meaning, content, and theological weight of each."¹⁵ In addition, they feel that in order for a theological reflection model to be effective:

It will also be imperative to describe a method which is *performable* (that is, a method that can not only be appreciated, but practically used by a range of ministers) and which issues in pastoral decisions and ministerial strategies.¹⁶

Thus they outline their method as a correlation between three sources: tradition, cultural information, and personal experience. Tradition is "that information we draw both from Scripture and from Church history concerning a specific pastoral concern."¹⁷ Cultural information is data collected from our culture that influences the particular pastoral issue being reflected upon. Personal experience is the source of information available from an individual person or faith community. In the Whiteheads' model, they place emphasis on the personal pole as the initiator of reflection.

Initiating reflection at the pole of experience reverses the theological proclivity to begin its reflections "at the beginning" (Scripture and early Church history) and work forward. Such reflections have a way of not reaching the present, of not coming to terms with the contemporary experience of faith.¹⁸

¹⁴ Ibid., xxix.

¹⁵ James D. Whitehead and Evelyn Eaton Whitehead, *Method in Ministry: Theological Reflection and Christian Ministry* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1983), 11-12.

¹⁶ Ibid., 12.

¹⁷ Ibid., 13.

¹⁸ Ibid., 17.

Theological Reflection from a Protestant Canadian Context

Beginning with experience reflected upon in light of tradition and culture, the Whiteheads outline their correlative process of attending, assertion and decision as a method for theological reflection. The primary stage of attending is seeking "out the information on a particular pastoral concern that is available in personal experience, Christian Tradition, and cultural sources."¹⁹ It is an activity of gathering and listening. Assertion is the place of naming insights that have arisen from attending. Decision is the movement "from insight through decision to concrete pastoral action."²⁰

The Whiteheads' model does not exist in isolation. Other models have emerged to suit various contexts. Another model is the hermeneutical circle that is dialectic between personal experience and scripture/tradition, where each is affected by the other in an ongoing conversational process.²¹ In addition, there is the pastoral circle model that engages a particular pastoral concern in conversation with social analysis, as well as theological, faithful and pastoral questions.²² From the Protestant tradition, there is the method developed by John Wesley called the Wesleyan Quadrilateral. This method engages scripture, tradition, experience and reason in an interdependent conversation.

In addition to the above practitioners, two contemporary models developed by Canadians John Klassen and Jean Stairs have been influential. John Klassen developed his model for use in Theological Field Education at Emmanuel College.²³ This model has influenced numerous Theological Field Education programs throughout Canada. Jean Stairs, presently principal at Queen's Theological School, developed a model of theological reflection where examination of particular pastoral issues occurs in the midst of carefully chosen Biblical texts.²⁴

While theological reflection models have a variety of movements, all models have one characteristic in common. They are prompted by contextual experience. The term theological reflection describes a process of intentional critical reflection on experience. Theological reflection, in the broadest sense, is any moment of seeking meaning from experience. Various methods encourage this process. Methods may vary, yet all of them have similar characteristics or movements. I

¹⁹ Ibid., 22.

²⁰ Ibid., 22.

²¹ The term "hermeneutical circle" was first used by Rudolph Bultmann in *History and Eschatology* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1957), although he did not describe the methodology that developed with later theologians.

²² Two examples of the pastoral circle are described in: Donald Capps, *Pastoral Care and Hermeneutics* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984) and Joe Holland and Peter Henriot, *Social Analysis: Linking Faith and Justice* (New York: Orbis Books, 1983).

²³ This model was outlined in the Theological Field Education Handbook for Emmanuel College from 1986 -1994.

²⁴ Jean Stairs, *Consciousness-raising in Theological Field Education: Sexism and Ministry* (Toronto: University of St. Michael's College, 1990), Doctor of Ministry Thesis.

Theological Reflection from a Protestant Canadian Context

use various models based upon four movements of attending, analyzing, interpreting, and acting.

1. **Attending** to a particular moment that raises questions or issues.
Theological reflection can start anywhere, but in Field Education I prefer to begin with experience. At the point of attending, a particular action has occurred that arouses questions. It might be a happening that raises huge existential questions, such as a death. Or it might be the regular, repeated actions that raise the question, "So what?". No experience is excluded. The movement of attending means taking intentional time to be attentive to a particular experience. Attentiveness means describing the experience from a personal perspective as well as from the perspective of others. Attentiveness also includes naming feelings.
2. **Analyzing** that moment with frameworks, such as sociology, psychology, history, art forms, economics and theology.
Analyzing moves people from a description of the experience to a deeper exploration of the issue. Analysis may draw on a wide variety of cultural resources such as social sciences. Because this is theological reflection rather than only social analysis, this movement would also include resources such as scripture, church history, present church documents and practices. Within Field Education, I encourage students to draw upon material from their theological studies.
3. **Interpreting** and drawing insight from the analysis.
This movement is similar to the Whiteheads' concept of "assertion." Interpreting is the moment when the reflector draws insights and interpretations from the analytical process.
4. **Acting** upon insights gleaned from the critical reflection process.
The insights drawn may issue in a decision toward action. This action may be a continuation of previous action, such as a decision to continue ongoing care of an elderly family member. Or, there may be a decision to undertake new actions, such as moving the elderly family member to a care facility. On the other hand, the originating issues may clarify a theology of care for aging family members.

In addition to a particular method, a further element was necessary in this process: intentional time to reflect. Critical reflection, in general, is a process of reflecting on life events to discern assumptions and presuppositions and to search for why those assumptions and presuppositions are at work. Jack Mezirow, in examining critical reflection as a process within adult education, suggests, "critical reflection cannot become an integral element in the immediate action process. It requires a hiatus in which to reassess one's meaning

Theological Reflection from a Protestant Canadian Context

perspectives and, if necessary, to transform them."²⁵ Thus, some intentional time or hiatus is essential for the process of reflection. I expect students to provide a brief weekly theological reflection as well as a lengthier, written theological reflection for group presentation and discussion. The writing process creates an oasis in which to reflect deeply and explore personal and theological assumptions. The group discussion offers the experience of reflecting in community.

While reflection, in general, is part of the ongoing moments of thinking, feeling and interpreting life events, *theological* reflection involves a distinct critical process. Each model begins with personal or corporate experience. The intention is to encourage critical reflection and analysis of experience, drawing from various analytical frameworks. What makes this reflection theological in nature is the intentional exploration of God's activity or God's presence in specific life events. What makes this intentional exploration both a joy and a struggle is the diversity of images of God. Joy arises in the discovery of a multi-faceted God, bound with us in an ever-renewing relationship. The struggle lies in discerning God from a variety of images within specific life experiences.

Within the United Church tradition, God is portrayed in a variety of ways. This is clear through the liturgical year when God is described through scripture and celebrated in the sacraments of baptism and communion. From the Old Testament tradition, God is creator of the universe, the one who calls us to responsible stewardship of all creation (Genesis 1:28). In the exodus story, God is a covenantal God, who calls the people of Israel into relationship with the one God. This God sustains the Israelites throughout their wilderness journey. God hears the cries of the Israelites and responds in love. Even though God is a lover of humanity, God also calls for justice. Through the prophets, God is heard challenging people to respond to those who are oppressed and marginalized within society.

In the New Testament, God is seen as a babe in a barn, a sustainer of Jesus in the wilderness, the intimate Abba who heals through the hands of Jesus, and the God who receives and resurrects the crucified son. For Christians, the person of Jesus urges people to love God with all their hearts and minds and souls, and to love others as themselves (Matthew 22:34-40). Jesus embodies the God relationship so fully he points clearly toward God. Within this loving relationship there is a sense of the movement and activity of a calling God. Although God's activity is a beacon to humanity, it is met with humanity's free choice to hear and respond. It is at this intersection of beacon and choice that theological reflection exists.

Theological Reflection in Practice

²⁵ Jack Mezirow, *Fostering Critical Reflection in Adulthood* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1991), 13.

Theological Reflection from a Protestant Canadian Context

Killen and de Beer strongly state that "things which don't shift and grow are dead things."²⁶ They assume that the desire or urge to reflect is a normal human process because our natural impulse is to find meaning in the events of our lives. We do this in many ways. Coming home from a party we begin to dissect all the conversations, what people said, meant, felt and where wearing. When we read the newspaper we are reflecting on the issues in our communities and in the world. We have thoughts and opinions on what's going on. When we think about our families and friends, we think about how they are doing, what they, in our humble opinion, *should* be doing, and lifting up both their good qualities and their places for improvement. I suggest that we reflect all the time on everything we do and everything that happens, even right at this moment as we read this article.

But beyond the urge to simply reflect, as Field Education practitioners, we want students to engage in **theological** reflection because it is a way for us to see the presence of God's spirit in the events of our lives. It is a process of bringing the conversations in our heads about our lives, together with our beliefs, faith and tradition. In Field Education, it is important that students become more aware of *how* they theologically reflect. It is that increased awareness that will deepen the practice of reflection.

Our church tradition offers us a rich and faithful testimony to the ways God's spirit has been at work in the world over centuries, yet the kind of questions raised by our present day context do not give us easy answers that can be applied in every situation. For instance, the Bible does not teach us how to deal with E-coli bacteria in our water system that kills innocent people. In the history of the church there isn't much about genetic engineering, or teens on drugs, or whether to put our parent in a home, or how we should run the next stewardship campaign at church. Searching for meaning through theological reflection is not easy, because it does not give us unchanging and absolute answers. When we engage in theological reflection, we cannot assume where we will end up because it is a process that is open and flexible. In the end, theological reflection may confirm our beliefs or challenge us in a new way or clarify what we have been struggling with in our lives. In any case, theological reflection will certainly expand both how we understand our own experience and how we understand the religious tradition.

Killen and de Beer talk about two extremes that may limit the ways we engage in theological reflection: certitude and self-assurance. These are two ends of a spectrum. Both positions share a lack of openness to shift in assumptions and views. In terms of certitude, Killen and de Beer are not suggesting that we shouldn't have any belief system. Yet they are challenging us to be open in our reflection because if we simply hold on to what we believe, even in the light of life

²⁶ Killen, Patricia O'Connell and de Beer, John. *The Art of Theological Reflection*. (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1994), p. vii.

Theological Reflection from a Protestant Canadian Context

challenges, we are out of step with ourselves. Further, "when we apply absolute rules to situations, we avoid having to look deeply at the situation and the people involved."²⁷ In that sense, certitude can border more on ideology, rather than theology.

Killen and de Beer also challenge the opposite extreme: self-assurance. They are not talking about the self-assurance that gives us confidence and poise. They are talking about a rigid stance that will not risk being challenged by new points of view or information, particularly from faith and church tradition. This type of self-assurance often comes from a place of insecurity, fear and mistrust. "Fed up with the frailty and fallibility of our contexts, we may decide to trust only ourselves, our own experience, how we think and feel now, in each new situation."²⁸

Killen and de Beer suggest that the "standpoint of **certitude** costs us our experience in order to possess the tradition. The standpoint of **self-assurance** costs us the richer meaning and understanding that the Christian tradition has to offer in order to make our current thoughts, feelings and desires primary."²⁹ What's the alternative to these two extremes? Obviously, an open exploration through theological reflection offers us the opportunity for "thoughts, feelings, images and insights that arise from the concrete events of our lives to be in genuine conversation with the wisdom of the entire Christian community throughout the ages."³⁰

Within theological reflection models, there can be any number of questions to encourage reflecting theologically. Basic questions that might be used to encourage theological connections are:

1. Where is God for you? Where is God for others?
2. What Biblical stories or images come to mind?
3. What theological themes or concepts come to mind?
4. What church traditions or global traditions inform the issues?

Other questions may be just as useful in encouraging a theological exploration, yet these questions are a starting point for discussion.

Where is God?

The opening question, "Where is God for you?" allows a simple starting place for a student to name the movement of God's spirit in the event. It is a way to enter theological discussion from a more personal place rather than the oft-felt abstraction of theological language. Adding a question such as "Where is God

²⁷ Ibid., p. 7

²⁸ Ibid., p. 10.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 13-14.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 18.

Theological Reflection from a Protestant Canadian Context

present or absent in this situation?” also encourages students to recognize the gaps in their theological construct. For instance, many people have a sense of a sacred and secular world. While they are able to talk about God’s presence within the confines of church work, they find it harder to name God’s activity outside the church. I challenge this sacred/secular split. I believe that all life and activity embodies God’s spirit, therefore nothing is secular in the sense of being outside God’s purview. This opens up the possibility that God is everywhere and in everything. However, we may feel the absence of God as a natural movement of our spiritual lives, that same absence that Jesus felt as he hung in agony on the cross.

The partner question “Where is God for others?” challenges students to think about differences in theological perspective. As we wrestle theologically, we need to be aware of our own theological world as the framework of how we understand God and God’s activity in the world and in relation to creation. We all have a theological world whether we have actually spent time consciously thinking about it or not. Our theological world is not going to be the same as someone else’s theological world. I may feel a sense of call to help street people as I give pocket change to a panhandler. The person receiving my change may be praying for the rich to be brought low and the poor to inherit the earth.

When asking the straightforward theological question “Where is God in this situation?” it is important not simply to reflect our own worldview, theological framework and desires. We could ask where God might be for each of the people in a situation and have very different answers. For instance, God is present as I drink my cup of coffee in the morning and feel that reviving jolt of caffeine. Perhaps it is the Holy Spirit at work. However, the issue of coffee has a very different emphasis for someone in another country where growing coffee over other crops is imperative to paying off the national debt to the International Monetary Fund. For this person, God may be an educating voice calling coffee drinkers to pay fair trade prices for coffee rather than waiting to buy coffee on sale. God may be hearing the cries of the poor and rebuking the rich for holding such crippling debt over “little ones” in other areas of the world. Therefore, what we want to do in asking the “Where is God?” question is to enter into open and transformative possibilities for where God’s spirit may take us. It may not be where we expected.

Each of us is entitled to our own faith and theological world. Yet as ministers we have a particular role as leaders in our congregations. We may have our own personal faith and theological outlook, yet as leaders we are called to be sensitive to the faith and theological outlook of others. This distinction is important in the lives of students who are moving from a personal call to an identity as a minister who encourages faith-filled responses to God’s call within community. Many students find this distinction helpful because they feel free to be attentive to the richness of theological and spiritual diversity within their

Theological Reflection from a Protestant Canadian Context

congregations. Some find this concept more difficult as they struggle with the ability to separate themselves and their theological agenda from the theological worldview of others. Being able to step outside our own theological world into the world of another is not only a theological discipline but also a pastoral discipline.

What Biblical stories or images come to mind?

I have found that encouraging students to make Biblical connections is challenging. Students tend to have little Biblical background. Biblical courses assume a base knowledge of the Bible from which to plunge into Biblical analysis. Therefore, after doing several theological reflections using favorite Bible passages, students have exhausted their repertoire. Students tend to find it difficult to make connections between a situation and a particular passage unless the text relates explicitly to the experience. In addition, students typically choose passages that confirm and support the theological thesis presented rather than choosing passages that challenge the thesis. New Testament stories are preferred because they seem more accessible than those in the Old Testament, therefore the richness of the Biblical landscape is limited. Narrative stories are preferred because they are more familiar and because larger themes such as exodus or covenant are less familiar.

One way to increase Biblical knowledge and to enable connections is to use the lectionary readings for each week. A student can read the four texts on a Monday and go about their Field Education work seeing their experiences through the lens of those texts. This is a liturgical and sermon-writing discipline, yet it also offers life to theological reflection. Many students have found this to be enriching as words from texts begin to dance through their heads in particular situations. Placements in social ministry situations connect with the Psalms and the liberative themes of the Old Testament. Students working in correctional placements discover that inmates find comfort in texts that show a judgmental God who nonetheless forgives the sinner.

I encourage students to find texts that both support and challenge their theological and pastoral position. For instance, a student who was consistently using the theological idea that God does not give us any more than we can handle was encouraged to consider that bowed down by pain and despair we might cry out “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?” Exploring the Psalms helped her to hear the fear, anger, agony or shame within pastoral encounters. It helped her to realize that God is able to listen to the full range of our feelings and respond in love.

In terms of challenge, we may find ourselves on the opposite side of God’s agenda. A student working in the “Out-of-the-Cold” program, an outreach to street people, heard Jesus’ call to care for the ‘little ones’ as a challenge to his life of relative wealth. He acknowledged the life of privilege and power he led and wrestled with the prophetic condemnation of those who ignored the widow and

Theological Reflection from a Protestant Canadian Context

the lame. Drawing on texts that call us to feed, clothe, visit and release the captive, gave a different lens to view social activism and political policy. Drawing on reading in liberation theology, he began to frame a contextual theology that was based in political and social structures surrounding the issues of poverty and homelessness. While it was a painful process because it overturned previous assumptions and put him in a very uncomfortable place, it was a journey of blessing and grace.

Biblical texts are alive with myriad images and concepts of God. This enables students to explore issues of inclusive language, using images that are not exclusively male, or disrespectful of other cultures and sexual orientations. The movement from doing a personal theological reflection to sharing this reflection with a seminar group means we have a larger conversation. Biblical texts are examined, more texts are gathered, exegesis emerges. One student finds a parental image of God to be helpful. Yet, another student experiences an implied hierarchy in the children of God concept that is denigrating of human partnership.

Examining the ways we conceive of God, whether immanent, transcendent or incarnate, helps to develop awareness not only of the variety of ways we personally think about God but the ways Biblical writers and people throughout our Christian tradition have grappled with this Biblical God who is revealed and continues to be revealed in our lives. This opens up the idea that the Bible is a collection of books with such variety that some texts may have more weight than others. Some texts may even comment on another. Thus, in grappling with Biblical texts in light of experience, a hermeneutic of suspicion begins to become more than an academic discipline and more of a pastoral practice.

What theological themes or concepts come to mind?

God created the earth, all living creatures, humanity, and the universes, therefore all creation is God's and considered sacred. As mentioned earlier, I prefer not to make a distinction between sacred and secular. Therefore, all language is theological. Obviously, there is some language that is more clearly or explicitly about God and some that is implied.

Theological students have taken theological courses of one kind or another, yet many have difficulty drawing on the theological language and concepts that they have learned. I begin by asking them to fill several newsprint sheets with theological words and concepts that they know. From initial moments of silence come a few tentative offerings. Then the flood occurs as they realize the richness of vocabulary they have learned.

After collecting these words, I encourage them to refer to this list as they reflect, asking them to search for the theological words and themes that are present in seemingly mundane events. Often the barrier is that there are no explicit theological words used in most pastoral situations. Students need to learn the

Theological Reflection from a Protestant Canadian Context

skill of translation, translating the language of daily cares and joys into explicit theological language. It is like building a bridge between two worlds of language. For instance, a terminally ill woman shared with a student, "I'm afraid to die." She felt she had not done all that she could with her life and was worried about mistakes she had made. While she did not use theological language, in translating, we can hear her wondering about what awaits her after death, perhaps judgment, for instance. We hear her need for God's grace and reassurance of God's forgiveness.

Initially, the student may not make theological connections at the bedside. These connections may only arise from intentional written theological reflection or from the class discussion that follows. However, as skill increases, the connections will happen more quickly, more automatically. After eight months of weekly theological reflection a student declared with a mixture of joy and amazement, "I can't even watch a movie or go to the grocery store without thinking theologically!" While this integration is wonderful, I do caution that suddenly peppering our pastoral responses with theological words may not be helpful. Sometimes the theological conversation happens in our heads only. On the other hand, our ministerial identity as distinct from other helping professions means that offering God-language is our job. The student may need to learn the fine line between suggesting that God's love, grace and forgiveness are available to all and offering a doctrinal dissertation on Barth's understanding of grace.

The question may arise, "Why bother with explicitly theological language?" First, we have inherited this language from our church tradition. Like any inheritance it may comprise great riches. On the other hand, perhaps some concepts are not relevant to us now. Nonetheless, these concepts are imbued with historic understanding. I often reflect on the fact that while there may be some theological concepts that are unimportant to me, there were early church Jesus-followers who died defending a particular concept. I benefit from the theological reflection and faith of those who have gone before me, the "cloud of witnesses" that Paul talks about.

Second, theological language describes a body of knowledge. A medical person uses particular language as part of the science and structure of medicine. Thus, there is the same science or branch of knowledge requiring systematic study and method and structure within theology. One of the areas of study in theology is called "systematic theology" which describes the way we think about theological ideas in an organized fashion. While we will not have all the answers to theological questions, we do need to have some organization to the way we think. Also, we need to have some consistency about what we think theologically and how we behave. In other words, we need to live our theology. We need to have integrity between what we say about God and how we live.

Theological Reflection from a Protestant Canadian Context

Third, theological language can be described as the “tools of the trade”. It is part of our pastoral identity. Exploration of reasons why a person might want to talk to a minister as opposed to some other helping professional is helpful. It helps to form pastoral identity and overcome those initial fears of walking into a hospital room or doing a home visit or chatting with guests at social ministry drop-in centres by examining the question, “Why would people want to talk to a minister?” From a pastoral point of view, they may be the only accessible source of help in isolated areas, offering pastoral services free of charge. Ministers are trustworthy; their opinions may be valued. Sometimes people do not know what they need except for a listening ear or a safe person with whom to express feelings, to clarify a situation, and gain perspective on the question “Am I really crazy?”

From a theological perspective a minister:

- Places herself/himself in a value framework of a Christian perspective
- Offers a safe place to confess, open up, share anguish, be consoled, be rescued, be taken to task, be restrained, encouraged, and blessed
- Becomes a doorway into a faith group or denomination
- Makes connections between tradition and life situations
- Is a theologian
- Offers a religious or moral perspective
- Is a Holy person and keeper of the faith symbols
- Is a counselor in religion, theology, faith and Christian life

For these reasons and more, access to theological language and ideas is essential to the art of ministry. Aside from a list of theological words from which to refer, a more in-depth framework for identifying theological themes would be helpful. The following adaptation of Pruyser’s³¹ model of how to identify pastoral themes offers a template to reflect upon events and situations. This template is not exhaustive but may be a starting point for a student to develop a template derived from pastoral experience and theological exploration. The questions accompanying each category are meant for personal reflection during and after the pastoral contact.

Awareness of the Holy:

All of us have a sense of what is holy, or deeply important to us. It may be the God of Christian faith or another faith. We may not have a faith, believing that God does not exist. Yet, whatever is at the core of our being, our values, whatever we give supreme importance is what we hold sacred or holy. It might be money or family or loyalty or the company.

- What is sacred or holy? What offers a feeling of bliss or awe? What is revered or idolized? What are the gods of this person?

³¹ Paul W. Pruyser. *The Minister as Diagnostician: Personal Problems in Pastoral Perspective*. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976).

Theological Reflection from a Protestant Canadian Context

Providence:

Each of us has a sense of providence, a sense of where we can count on care and protection now and in the future. Some people have this sense in abundance. Some people have been hurt so are cynical about where they might find care and protection.

- What is the divine purpose toward us? Why? Why me? What is God's will? Am I worthy of help? Where is hope? Does God owe me specific benefits?

Faith:

Regardless of whether we are Christians or not, we have faith in something. Where we place our faith shapes who we are and how we act and react in situations.

- What does this person have faith in? Is their faith in God, self, other people or experiences? How does the Bible fit into faith and beliefs?

Grace or gratefulness:

Grace is a sense of kindness, beauty, gift and receiving something for nothing. It is our sense that we can feel worthy of receiving favour and goodwill from God and from others.

- Does this person feel worthy of grace or forgiveness? Do they feel they need to earn this grace? Or is there a sense that grace is unnecessary? Do they feel God ever smiles upon them?

Repentance:

Repentance is a sense of regret for actions taken. Sometimes, repentance is an important movement of taking responsibility for hurts inflicted. Sometimes, repentance is taking the blame for others. People need not stay in a place of repentance. It is a movement from repentance toward greater well-being or perhaps forgiveness.

- Is this person an agent in their change? What is their awareness of sin? Is there a movement to take responsibility for actions? Or are they too ready to shoulder all the responsibility and become a martyr?

Communion and Community:

This is a sense of being in communion with God and others, a sense of community whether at church, within family or with friends. It is a feeling of being supported or perhaps a feeling of isolation. This sense can be connected with the service of Communion where we remember Christ's death and resurrection and gain greater communion or community with God.

- Does this person feel lifted up or isolated? Would it be helpful to look at community support or discuss the sense of alienation? Is this person close to an individual or to a group or a larger community?

Theological Reflection from a Protestant Canadian Context

Vocation:

This is a sense of purpose to our life and work that validates our existence. It may be centered in a sense of God calling us to particular work or just a sense that we are more attracted or gifted for some other area of work.

- What is frustrating or satisfying about what the person does? Is there a realistic sense of what's going on within this situation? What does the person want to do with their life?

I encourage students not to be afraid to use the tools of the trade. In a pastoral conversation, this is a time to offer blessing, to pray and to speak the words of God's grace, gathering the thoughts and words of the person into requests for God's blessing, guidance, love, support and care. If students are uncomfortable with spontaneous prayer, they can write a few simple prayers or blessings and memorize them.

What church traditions or global traditions come to mind?

From the personal and interpersonal, we move to the communal. As a United Church, we value community, worship communally, confess communally, and share sacramental moments of baptism and communion as communal events. We are educated, fed and nurtured communally for the task of being in larger communion with brothers and sisters in the immediate community, larger community and the global community.

Asking questions that connect us to our church tradition encourages both an historic connection and a connection to church reports, documents, and polity. This is an important movement in a church that values congregational decision-making, yet combines that with an interdependent relationship with other courts of Presbytery, Conference and General Council.

Within a congregation or institutional community, a minister is "theologian in residence" and the person who explicitly frames the Christian tradition. We are the "teaching elder" offering opportunities through our questions for people to theologially reflect on events in their lives. It is important not only to practise theological reflection, but to teach and encourage theological reflection with others because it:

- Helps us to make a connection between life and faith
- Encourages us to hear God's spirit at work in life events
- Gives us a better sense of Christian identity
- Develops an awareness of theological assumptions in events
- Offers a process of daily spiritual discipline

Theological Reflection from a Protestant Canadian Context

We do not live in an age where one person has all the information necessary within a community. It is important that a community be a learning community able to reflect on who it is, what it is doing, where it is going and why. This raises the question of what kind of leader we are in relationship to our congregation or institution. Thomas Hawkins suggests that styles of leadership are changing in a world that embraces change as the status quo. Leadership styles of the past are no longer sufficient thus requiring a new awareness, a different orientation.

Church leaders traditionally gave attention to teaching Christians the proper doctrines and beliefs. In the emerging information era, they [need to] equip Christians with tools and strategies that allow them to learn continuously by reflecting on their everyday ministry experiences.³²

This means making the tools of theological reflection accessible to the gathered community so that all God's people can theologically reflect. This means taking an awareness of God's activity into all areas of life, and into local communities. It means viewing world events and relationships to other cultures and faith groups through a continuous theological lens.

Conclusion

Jesus theologically reflected in the wilderness in order to clarify and discern his relationship to God and his sense of ministry. He continued to theologically reflect as he healed, preached, taught, forgave, ate and wept with people. His life, crucifixion, death and resurrection demands fresh theological reflection in each generation as we discern our sense of relationship to God and new directions for ministry. Theological reflection is the heart of Field Education, a heart that needs to beat strongly offering life to our students and to the church.

³² Hawkins, Thomas R. "The Learning Congregation: A New Vision of Leadership." (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997).

Theological Reflection from a Protestant Canadian Context

Theological Field Education and Leaving Christendom: Initial Reflections

Stuart Macdonald

Director of Basic Degree and Theological Field Education, Knox College, Toronto

Context matters. As theological field educators we are very conscious of the importance of context. We ask students to consider how the context in which they are ministering shapes the questions they have and offer new insight into theological issues. We encourage colleagues teaching disciplines like theology, history, ethics and Biblical studies to think about how the context changes the issues which students must face. We ask ourselves in our institutions and in the church to consider the same question. As Canadian theological field educators we often note the differences between our context and that of our friends and colleagues in the United States. “That wouldn’t work here,” we sometimes say, “because our context is different.” Context is foundational as we gather as colleagues at events like the Association of Theological Field Educators (ATFE) Biennial gatherings. Ironically, it was the attempt to deal with context in the theme addresses at the latest gathering (Boston, 2001) which made me conscious of one overarching context which seems to be missing from most of these discussions – the collapse of Christendom.¹

On the one hand we know better, while on the other hand we talk as if the church still has a privileged place within society. Perhaps this remains true for our American colleagues (a point that warrants further discussion, but which I’m willing to concede for the moment), but it certainly is not true for us in Canada. The overall decline of the role and authority of the church in contemporary Canadian society is only too real.

Leaving Christendom has a profound implication for theological education in general and for theological field education specifically. My argument will be simple: these changes in context are putting pressure on theological field education to change its way of thinking. In some cases theological field educators are being asked to shift the primary focus in their placements from

¹ Christendom is a term that has a variety of definitions. For the purposes of this paper, I would argue Christendom exists when Christianity is the assumed religion of the culture with a place of privilege. Within Christendom it is assumed that every member of society is a Christian – or should be – apart from small religious minorities. It is also assumed that the state will reflect Christian values, however defined, in legislation and all government actions. The addresses were entitled “Revolution: Changing Church and Theological Education” and were presented by Harvey Cox and Rebecca S. Chopp at the Biennial gathering in Boston, January 17-21, 2001.

Theological Reflection from a Protestant Canadian Context

education to more practically focused training or practicums.² In other words, where we might want to discuss learning goals, our constituencies will demand that we deal with issues of competence and preparedness. In some of our theological colleges related to denominations, which have mandatory internship, this pressure might not be as significant, but for others of us this is an area of discussion and tension.

In order to help us see how this changing context may affect theological field education, we must begin by briefly discussing the massive and ongoing changes which suggest that we are in the midst of a process which can best be described as “leaving Christendom”. Three important observations need to be made about this process: how extensive this process is; how the debate around its solutions has become intensely ideological; and how the uncertainty and turmoil create practical issues which have a direct impact on theological education in general and theological field education in particular. Some initial thoughts as to the implications for theological field education will close the discussion.

It has been difficult for Canadian Protestants to move from the naïve optimism of the 1950’s when mainline denominations expanded into the suburbs, through the self-examination of the 1960’s, the malaise of the 1970’s, into a realization that a significant shift has occurred in the place of organized religion within Canadian society. Awareness of this shift comes and goes and has been expressed in all kinds of different ways. Sometimes it is a simple awareness that not as many people seem to be attending church as was the case in the past. Within this awareness, it is often noted that the “young people” seem to be most noticeable by their absence. Over the last thirty years the most noticeable change has been how the word “young” has expanded in meaning. Where it once meant people primarily in their 20’s, it now seems to mean everyone under 50. Sometimes this leads churches to panic, looking for almost any solution to the problem, however it is perceived. Change the music. Change the hour of worship. Change the liturgy. At other times – or even the same time – denominations and congregations often responded as if nothing had changed, as if they still held a privileged place within society and within people’s lives.

Several events in my own denomination’s experience are illustrative of these fluctuating emotions of panic and denial. In some ways the Presbyterian Church in Canada’s decision to double itself in the 1980’s was an example of both. Inspired by the explosive growth of Presbyterian churches in Korea, the proponents of the idea dreamed that it could happen in Canada. Little thought was given to the different contexts of the two countries. A simple solution was proposed; it failed. Another key moment happened several years later when

² I use the word practicum to mean those kinds of work experiences where competency is evaluated. For example, in the education system student teachers must practice teach in a classroom. If they are not successful they have to leave the degree program.

Theological Reflection from a Protestant Canadian Context

Knox College, the largest theological college in the Presbyterian Church in Canada, hosted Loren Mead of the Alban Institute at a pre-convocation workshop and gathering. The event was remarkably well attended with both clergy and lay people involved in vigorous discussion. About halfway through the event something became clear: some of those who had signed-up for the event ceased to participate. "Why?" I asked a friend who had noticeably dropped out. The answer: having read Mead and heard him speak before, there seemed to be little new offered. At the same time, I encountered others who argued against the basic premise that Loren Mead was proposing -- the idea that we were in the midst of a significant paradigm shift. As they saw it, everything was fine with their particular congregation. Maybe if others did what they were doing, with new ways of greeting people, or initiating this new program, all would be well. A crucial division developed between those for whom this was old news and those who were arguing whether the news was even accurate. The denomination continues to struggle with whether there is a significant crisis, or whether all we need is a simple solution.

Timidly, uncertainly and sporadically the church has occasionally noted that our place in our culture has changed. Some have embraced the language of "paradigm shift" given to us Thomas Kuhn and applied to the church context by Loren Mead, and argued that the changes we are witnessing are dramatic. At the same time, many of the solutions put forward as the answer to our problems are of a minor nature. Small groups (inspired by Willow Creek or the writings of William Easum), changes in the music program, the hiring of youth workers – these and other "solutions" have been proposed. Not coincidentally, the number of books on the subject of church survival, the child of church growth, has exploded. It has been difficult over the last few years not to become involved in discussions of the merits of William Easum's, *Dancing with Dinosaurs*, Tom Bandy's, *Kicking Habits: Welcome Relief for Addicted Churches*, Marva Dawn's *Reaching out without Dumbing Down* and a variety of similar books. In one year, 1997, three books on the subject of church health and survival were published in Canada alone: Bandy's *Kicking Habits*, Don Posterski and Gary Nelson's, *Future Faith Churches* and James Taylor's edited work *The Yes Factor: New Life and Renewal in Sixteen Churches*. In the search for "how to" solutions the reflections of Canadian theologian Doug Hall, in particular his brief and wonderful *The End of Christendom and the Beginning of Christianity*, has been neglected.

The signs are there if only we will notice them. The church is experiencing a massive transition in its place within society and culture. Tacit support from the state can no longer be taken as a given. While we may be too close to clearly see all that is happening, the change is real and far-reaching. The term post-modern, often used in theological colleges, may be significant in noting some of the philosophical aspects of this change. At the same time there are other equally significant changes, which are better captured by speaking of either moving into a post-Christendom era or by saying that we are leaving

Theological Reflection from a Protestant Canadian Context

Christendom. Three important observations need to be made. First, the crisis is real, deep-seated, and further along in Canada than in the United States, a fact that is only noteworthy because in Canada we often have to use American data. Second, the crisis has become increasingly ideological. And third, the practical results in terms of such things as levels of conflict within congregations are extremely serious.

The problem we are facing is not new although awareness of it may be more recent. For example, the established church in Scotland, the Church of Scotland, moved from growth to decline in the first decade of the twentieth century.³ Reginald Bibby's statistics in *Fragmented Gods* indicate that decline has been with us in Canada since at least 1925 – a year beyond which research is difficult given the foundation of the United Church in Canada from the Methodists, Congregationalists, and most of the Presbyterians in that year. For example, while Bibby's Table 1.1 shows an increase in actual members in the Presbyterian Church in Canada (those who didn't join the United Church) from 163,000 in 1926 to 201,000 in 1961, this represents only a minor increase in those on the membership role at a time when the Canadian population was expanding rapidly. As a percentage of the population, Presbyterians have slowly declined from 1.7% of the Canadian population in 1926 to 1.1% before the decade of the 1960's began.⁴ The long-term nature of this decline needs to be noted and considered. The problem is also universal to Western Christendom, affecting all countries and almost all denominations – Roman Catholic, Orthodox, mainline Protestant and evangelical Protestant. Discussions of the problem rarely take this fact into account. While local factors matter and may affect the pace of decline, the fact that Methodists in New Zealand, Anglicans in Australia, and Baptists in the United Kingdom are all in similar circumstances should alert us to the scale of the problem. Decline has been most extreme in Europe, including Great Britain, and has affected the United States less dramatically to this point in time. Yet the real issue does not seem to be an abandonment of the church based on a loss of belief, but rather a decline in participation. This is demonstrated by Bibby's statistical data on Canada.⁵ One of the most telling comments comes from Loren Mead, reporting on similar findings related to mainline churches in the United States:

Most of these dropouts did not drop out primarily because of something the religious institution was doing or was not doing. Rather it is as if the

³ Callum Brown, *Religion and Society in Scotland Since 1707* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), chapter 3, specifically pages 61-65.

⁴ Reginald Bibby, *Fragmented Gods: The Poverty and Potential of Religion in Canada* (Toronto, 1987), p.p. 14-15.

⁵ Bibby, *Fragmented Gods*. The first chapter is entitled, "The Great Canadian Attendance Drop Off". The first of Bibby's Ten Findings in *There's Got to be More! Connecting Churches and Canadians* (Winfield, B.C., 1995) also relates to attendance decline as key (p.p. 15-18).

Theological Reflection from a Protestant Canadian Context

church somehow slipped off their radar screens. It ceased to be important to them.⁶

Evidence from a variety of sources and countries supports this conclusion.

Both the large scope and length of time in which this problem has been developing are largely ignored in most conversations or discussions of church decline. Instead, the arguments have become ideological in nature, focusing around two mutually exclusive arguments: the church has not been relevant enough and thus has declined; or, church decline is the result of abandoning the core elements of the faith in order to be relevant. Since the immediate post-war period commentators have been advocating that the church move in this or that direction as they began to sense the significant changes which were already occurring within the institution. Canadians will remember the impact of Pierre Berton's *The Comfortable Pew* (1965), as well as other denominational responses such as the United Church of Canada's *Why the sea is boiling hot* and Joseph McLelland's wonderfully entitled Presbyterian rejoinder *Why our pond is lukewarm*, all of which argued for the church becoming more relevant to a changing world. Recent examples of the "relevance" camp include John Shelby Spong's, *Why Christianity must change or die* (1998) and John Cobb's *Reclaiming the Church: Where the mainline church went wrong and what to do about it* (1997). The "return to orthodoxy" camp found voice in Dean Kelley's very influential book *Why Conservative Churches are Growing* (1972) and has continued to advocate its position, including Thomas C. Reeves' *The Empty Church: Does Organized Religion Matter Anymore* (1996). Usually these opinions on both sides of the issue have been personal or reflective, not based upon hard data. The debate continues.

This intense ideological quarrel has allowed churches to remain in a state of denial of the crisis. Each of these books offers a relatively painless and simple solution to the change which most of us fear and the loss of its place of privilege in society which the institutional church in particular fears. For all the arguments, neither school can really answer the question – "if we did this, would things return to the way they were?" Instead, symptoms are often confused with causes, causes are ignored, and we are sold an ideological program. Kelley's thesis in particular has come under scholarly critique, and some interesting results have emerged. What is clear from this research is that the popular argument – "if we became more conservative we would grow" – is based upon wishful thinking, not reality.⁷ The same can be said of those who argue for relevance rather than a return to orthodoxy.

⁶ Loren Mead, *Transforming Congregations for the Future* (Alban, 1994), p. 16.

⁷ David A. Roozen, C. Kirk Hadaway, eds., *Church and Denominational Growth* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993). The introduction gives a valuable summary of the debate.

Theological Reflection from a Protestant Canadian Context

Given this slowly growing awareness of a serious problem and the various ideological solutions that have been proposed, it is no wonder that individual congregations have been affected. There are fewer people. There are less young people and children. The children of elders have stopped attending, and they really don't want to talk about it. The groups in the church that were once vital seem to limp along with the same people in leadership, and with nobody seemingly wanting to take over these positions and maintain the organization.

What has gone wrong? It is easy in such situations to look for the cause of the problem and propose solutions, to fight over priorities and the direction that a congregation should take. Intense conflict has become the experience of many congregations over the last two decades. Sometime this conflict is between members, but more and more it is between clergy and laity. Increasingly there is a feeling among many congregational ministers and judicatories that particular congregations simply could not handle one more conflict with a clergy person; should such a conflict erupt, the results would inevitably be a loss of financial viability. The pressure to ensure that competent clergy, indeed exceptional clergy, are placed in such congregations is very real. This has a direct effect upon expectations for theological education in general and theological field education in particular.

It is within this context of leaving Christendom that the church looks to theological colleges as the educators of future ministers. Sometimes the situation affects curriculum: "If only you offered a course in this topic..." we are told, the church's problems would be solved. The ideological divide can intrude itself into areas such as classroom teaching or even faculty appointments. Theological field education is not immune to these pressures which arise out of our context. Increasingly we are experiencing tensions related to these changes. We can see these tensions in the different goals and objectives that can be voiced between colleges and church, between our accrediting bodies and our judicatories. I would like to give a bit more background on my specific context, then note the areas where I have seen these tensions growing, namely in terms of the goals and objectives of theological field education, the choice of placement, and the means of assessment. This list is intended to be illustrative, not comprehensive.

In my particular context—Theological Field Education Director at a theological college of the Presbyterian Church in Canada—the vast majority of our students are Master of Divinity students preparing for congregational ministry. Students for ministry in our denomination do not have a mandatory internship component to their preparation for ministry. As comprehensive as the denomination's attempts are to prepare students for ministry, the simple truth is that many of them come from a different denominational background (another shift in our context) or even a limited church background. Even if they have grown up in the Presbyterian Church in Canada, there are no guarantees they have exercised leadership prior to coming to theological college. The obvious result—theological field education

Theological Reflection from a Protestant Canadian Context

carries an enormous amount of weight in terms of the individual student's preparation for ministry. One final word to explain the dilemma: upon graduation, most students will be ordained and move into small congregations, which average under 100 members, as the sole minister. There are no denominational educational or skills-based requirements beyond graduation and few presbyteries (the judicatory with responsibility for all ministers in its bounds) have active mentoring programs. In a wonderful move, our denominational office responsible for ministry is beginning a pilot project dealing with the first five years after leaving theological college.

As one can see, a great deal is expected of theological field education. In theory, students might move into congregational ministry with the four required credits of theological field education being their only experience of leadership in the Christian community. One of the crucial aspects of this process is assessment. What determines if a student passes or fails? If the student passes, does this mean that he/she is now competent to be a minister? Or is it an indication that they have learned something – specifically the goals that they have set out in their learning covenants? And who sets these goals? Shouldn't there be mandatory goals for all students doing congregational placements? There are some common ones, but students do have latitude beyond these goals.

Among theological field education colleagues, we seem to assume education is the vital element. One method of evaluation which I've seriously considered implementing is a method of negative assessment: students fail if they choose not to do certain things, such as hand the learning covenant in on time, attend classes, and so on. As someone who is tired of the endless reminders, I greatly sympathize with any who have implemented such an approach. This method also has sound professional goals, namely that those going into leadership in the church should be responsible enough to look after such details as paperwork. At the same time, I wonder what we miss when we move into using negative assessment as a model.

My friends and colleagues who serve in active congregational ministry are becoming increasingly demanding. What needs to be assessed, they insist, is competence. They are the ones who deal with conflicts in congregations as members of presbytery. After the painful experience of being part of the removal of a recent graduate from a congregation, the poignant questions of a minister from that presbytery as to "how did this person graduate?" or "how did s/he pass Field Education?" are not ones which should be ignored or brushed aside. These colleagues ask me to assess not whether the students have learned something, but whether they have significant gifts or capacity for ministry. It is the context of a church in crisis that drives these questions.

Assessment seems to be one of the most obvious and vital areas where this has an impact. In denominations where students have other requirements, it may be

Theological Reflection from a Protestant Canadian Context

ameliorated somewhat, but it is still something we need to consider. The 1996 Association of Theological Schools Standards (ATS) ask us to think of the entire M.Div. curriculum in terms of preparation for ministry, specifically to consider an individual student's "personal and spiritual formation" and his or her "capacity for ministerial and public leadership".⁸ How are we making this happen? In one sense broadening these responsibilities into all areas of the curriculum may be helpful, but one can't help wonder if, in practice, even more will be asked of the theological field education program as the one place where these skills are most obviously tested. How will we assess these items if the students themselves have not put anything in their learning covenants that relate to these areas?

The kind of placements which students do is another area where our context of leaving Christendom seems to be having an impact. To pose this as a question, are we preparing leaders for yesterday or tomorrow? One of the areas I have struggled with is placement in congregations doing "cutting-edge" ministries. One immediate and obvious difficulty is trying to distinguish between "cutting-edge" and "trendy". For all of the discussions regarding small-group ministries in our denomination in Ontario over the last five years, very few of these models have been effectively introduced. Yet, I have had students express an interest in working with congregations trying to establish these models. In addition, I have had supervisors suggest to me that because they were experimenting in this area, their congregation would be the best placement available. On the other hand, one can question whether any student should be in such a non-traditional placement. It is the responsibility of the theological college to determine appropriate placements. Apart from the obvious issues around boundaries, the point is raised as to whether students should be learning creative new models, or simply going somewhere to learn how it has always been done. Perhaps that is stated somewhat harshly, but occasionally the choice seems that stark and because the stakes are so high, given the experience of decline, some churches are reluctant to allow any kinds of options.

Do our own standards reflect this change in our context as we move out of Christendom? I value the guidelines on supervision which came out of the ATFE Biennial Consultation in 1993 at Austin, Texas, but some strike me as assuming a stability in what we are doing which is no longer present. For example, I have a running disagreement with a colleague who is in congregational ministry. He firmly believes that if the judicatory is to do its job in assessing whether a student is ready for ministry, it must see the theological field education reports. I counter this argument using the position taken by ATFE that these documents should be confidential, while feeling only sympathy for what is being said. Perhaps being a denominational college affects my judgment. At the same time, shouldn't we be working with judicatories? Or, is it that their expectations of theological field education and ours in the theological college are contradictory? Given the crisis in which we find ourselves as we leave Christendom, this contradiction has to be

8. ATS Standards 1996, A.3.13, A.3.1.4.

Theological Reflection from a Protestant Canadian Context

dealt with. One solution would be to advocate, in my particular context, for a mandatory internship program outside of the theological college. But, what does that say about theological education in general and theological field education specifically, if we are not capable of dealing with these issues?

I have suggested that one of the aspects of our context that matters profoundly, but which we seem reluctant to name, is the decline of the position of the church in Canada. I prefer to call this “leaving Christendom,” and agree with Doug Hall that not only are we leaving but also we should do it ourselves intentionally.⁹ Panic and denial seem the more prevalent reactions to what I have argued is a universal experience of Western Christendom. This is a context that we need to talk more about as theological field educators in terms of assessments, placements, professional standards and other issues. My prayer is that we will help students prepare for the dramatic changes that are in store for us as Christians in Canada over the next century. We can do this not only through theological field education, but also through the entire curriculum. There is no going back, nor is staying in the present an option. The future, as always, is unknown, frightening, and where God waits for us.

Is there any action that we should take? My own thoughts are still at an initial stage, but I would suggest two simple courses of action. First, I believe we need to begin talking openly about this change of context, about leaving Christendom. What will it mean for us to live in a culture where we are only one religious choice among many, where we have no special status, such as having our holidays observed or receiving special tax breaks? This is a situation those of us who have come from a European background have not experienced in over 1000 years. More to the point for theological field educators, the institutional structures or congregations which we now live in and worship in were designed within the ideal of Christendom. How will they function in a new reality? These are questions we need to consider.

Second, I believe we need to speak clearly to our colleagues about what we can and cannot do in theological field education. For those in the theological college itself, we might want to suggest that we cannot be expected to bear the entire weight of judging a student’s “capacity for Ministerial and Public Leadership”, to quote again the language from the new ATS standard for the Masters of Divinity. The entire curriculum must ensure that this standard is met. If our primary focus in theological field education can be more appropriately situated as helping people grow in their own “personal and spiritual formation” we need to stress this, both inside the academy and to our various church constituencies. This will raise other questions about where and how we ensure that our M. Div. graduates will be effective as ministers, or our graduates of other programs will be effective in other areas of ministry.

⁹ Douglas John Hall, *The End of Christendom and the Future of Christianity* (Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, 1997).

Theological Reflection from a Protestant Canadian Context

In a post-Christendom context, these are questions we must embrace. We cannot afford to avoid them. But theological field education alone cannot solve these issues. Part of the frustration at times may be that theological educators are being asked to solve and come to grips with these issues without any recognition that this is not what their job is about. But the frustration of those demanding something else from theological field education comes out of this new context, out of the realities of a situation where Christendom is slowly fading into the past. We need to talk about this clearly, rather than talking past each other. Numerous other issues may require our attention, but for now, tackling these two issues could be an important beginning.

Theological Reflection from a Protestant Canadian Context

Systemic Injustice of Heterosexism in Theological Education

Shelley Davis Finson

Professor of Pastoral Theology, retired, Atlantic School of Theology

Introduction

During the past twenty years, our churches have been embroiled in a discussion of homosexuality. Several denominations have had discussions within their judicatory structures in order to address what particular stance, both theologically and structurally, the denomination would take in terms of homosexual persons in their midst. To date, the issue around homosexual persons seeking recognition in ordered ministry has been the thorniest component of the debate.

This paper attempts to present an open dialogue on the relationship of theological schools to lesbian, gay or bisexual students who participate in the life and work of their schools. It suggests that dialogue is essential if theological schools are to model openness to diversity and differences within theological education. Included in this paper are concrete examples of ways to address institutionalized heterosexism. This paper also provides suggestions for revision of curriculum that includes the experience of homosexual persons. Central to the intention of the paper is the need for justice and love to be made concrete in terms of the relationship of theological schools to homosexual students, their partners and families.

The impetus for this work arose from my preparation to co-lead a working group at the Association for Theological Field Education (ATFE) on the Historically Invisible Student. The work began with the following questions:

What are some of the experiences of lesbian, gay and bisexual students engaged in theological education?

What are the structural/systemic dimensions of that experience?

Working with these questions, I incorporated into my analysis insights gained from dialogue with some lesbian and gay students, findings gleaned from reading during my sabbatical time at the Episcopal Divinity School, as well as insights gained at the ATFE meeting.

For several years now, Adult Education theory has provided understanding into what makes a viable learning context. For instance, we know that adults need to have their past experience honoured and that they thrive when they feel respect and affirmation along with challenge. Educators also know that context is fundamental to learning. Consequently, when we examine the experiential context of lesbian, gay and bisexual students in theological schools, it is

Theological Reflection from a Protestant Canadian Context

important to investigate the structural conditions of their lives. Many heterosexuals as well as homosexuals do not understand the rich diversity within the homosexual community.

Because structural analysis is a hopeful task, I believe the context of learning could be altered when structures are challenged and changed. I begin this work by asking “in what way does the structure of our theological schools, including curriculum, boards, and policies, work against the spiritual and theological development of homosexual students?”

Lesbian, Gay or Bisexual Experience in Theological Schools

Anyone who identifies himself/herself as homosexual faces a catch twenty-two situation. When the concerns or issues of lesbian, gay and bisexual people are named they are usually seen as “different” and yet, in order for the needs of homosexuals to be heard, it is essential that the “differences” be identified. Because of homophobia and heterosexism, a homosexual person’s whole life is exceptional. It is a life lived in a climate of non-acceptance and frequent hostility. The following are some identifiable circumstances that create tension and/or pain for lesbian, gay and bisexuals in theological schools.

Often when homosexuals ask for “space” or recognition in their schools they are accused of creating divisions or of making heterosexuals feel judged and/or guilty. When speaking or teaching of their lived experience as a gay, lesbian or bisexual person it is often viewed as one-sided and lacking in objectivity. In order to talk about their relationships, homosexuals have to “come out” and this usually means dealing with another’s homophobia or their uneasiness in knowing how to relate. Being forced to “hide” one’s real self means needing to be alert at all times so that the truth about themselves is not revealed. Homosexuals find ingenious and creative ways to speak about their lives in order not to contribute to their own invisibility, while at the same time needing to speak in such a way that does not land them in trouble. Students, whose identities include not only a sexual orientation that is “different” but who are part of other racial or cultural groups, often experience several layers of discrimination.

Normative status is granted to heterosexuals, even to those who do not seek or expect it. How does this happen and what would change look like if homosexuals were also granted normative status?

Theological Reflection from a Protestant Canadian Context

Policies and Practices

Institutional policies and practices, which assume that students are heterosexual, sustain heterosexual privilege. Administratively and socially, heterosexual students, faculty, and staff fit the system, while others do not.

For example:

- Written forms call for the name of a husband/wife.
- School gatherings encourage spouses to attend.
- Financial Aid does not recognize the family status of same gender partnerships.
- Dormitory designations such as Men/Women, Co-ed, and Married/Family, do not project a readiness to accommodate and affirm same gender partnerships. Some housing policies actually discriminate against homosexuals.
- Student handbooks seldom identify resources such as restaurants operated and frequented by other homosexuals or news outlets and bookstores that carry cultural materials of interest to gay, lesbian and bisexual people.
- Recruitment policies often do not express openness to gay, lesbian and bisexual students.
- Student services need to provide infrastructure and supportive resources that are diverse, inclusive, and not implicitly geared to the requirements and expectations of heterosexual students.
- School publications and catalogues could make the presence of lesbian, gay and bisexual people on campus more visible.

Counseling

In institutional social contexts where homophobia and heterosexism is experienced, lesbian, gay and bisexual students need access to counseling services that are consciously and explicitly “lesbian/gay/bisexual positive”.

Other points of interest include the following:

- Usually, no openly lesbian/gay/bisexual counselor is available for students and/or their families.
- Often information that is essential for both heterosexual and homosexual students about safe sex and about AIDS is not made available.
- Most student health services tend to be oriented toward the traditional family configuration thus making health services less approachable for homosexuals, with or without children.

Theological Reflection from a Protestant Canadian Context

- In order to provide relevant pastoral care, the unique experience of lesbian, gay or bisexual students from other ethnic minority backgrounds would need to be understood.
- The prevalence of homophobia and heterosexism in church and society means that, for many, “coming out” presents enormous challenges. More often than not, pastoral care and counseling personnel have inadequate understanding of what is involved when people discover themselves to be lesbian, gay or bisexual, or how to support persons in the process of “coming out”. This would also apply to both pastoral care givers and spiritual directors.

Liturgy

In seminaries and theological schools liturgies are usually informed by, and oriented to, heterosexual life experience. Inclusivity would not mean divorcing liturgical practices from the heterosexual world, but finding evenness in representations of images for God and for a variety of persons, including homosexual persons.

Some examples are:

- References to the particularities of bisexual, lesbian or gay experience is rare or non-existent. Within the predominantly heterosexual faith community, even the presence of family members of lesbian and gay persons is discounted or overlooked. Prayers that recognize the prevalence of AIDS, violence towards homosexuals and the covenanting of same gender relationships, could go a long way toward making the lives of homosexuals visible. Such realities indicate the need for pastoral inclusion of the experience of those who identify themselves as homosexual and their partners, relatives or friends who likely occupy one of the pews.
- In corporate worship, liturgies rarely engage the community in explicit acknowledgment, confession or repentance of, and intercession for the continual physical and psychological abuse that many gay, lesbian and bisexual people experience.
- For lesbians with a feminist consciousness, being constantly bombarded with exclusive male language in community worship reinforces the centrality and maleness in our culture, can be soul-destroying. Since the call for inclusive language, images and themes in liturgy heightens anxiety in many faith communities, the controversial agenda needs to be pursued with sensitivity. An educational process would be essential because interpretations of “inclusiveness” differ and evolve. However, in communities where open discussion and dialogue already exist, where inclusive language is at least an option if not yet the norm, there exists hope for those who seek life-giving liturgies.

Theological Reflection from a Protestant Canadian Context

Conspiracy of Silence

In analyzing the place of homosexual persons in theological schools, what stands out most glaringly for some is their connection to others at the school. Should the student share the “secret” with her/his colleagues and therefore place the colleagues in positions of both power and dilemma? To hear the “secret” would raise concerns of inadvertently bringing the homosexual person “out”. What would one say when asked about the sexual orientation of their peer? The conspiracy of silence weighs heavily on everyone because the homosexual person could well be disqualified and dropped from the candidacy process. For this reason, many prospective candidates for ordered ministry choose not to disclose a partnered (homosexual) relationship. Faculty are placed in an untenable position when required to make reports to church judicatories regarding students whom they know to be homosexual. They too must decide whether or not to participate in the “lie” or bring the student “out” which may have disastrous consequences for their future ministry. This situation is exacerbated where denominational policies specify that full-time personnel must be married or celibate.

Other potential problems include the following:

- Employment or housing may be in jeopardy for all homosexual students if they are open about their sexual orientation. This becomes even more of a problem if an individual expects to have her or his relationship affirmed.
- Support is hard to find in the context of a theological school when students have to remain silent about things that are of importance to them. On an emotional and/or spiritual level, forced silence is not healthy for anyone.
- Many homosexual students live in fear of being exposed, hated, or at the least, discounted. Homophobic response means that students are forced to expend energy in focusing on reactions to their homosexuality rather than on the academic tasks at hand.
- Students who “pass” in order to fit in give up their identity and an opportunity to be part of the gay/lesbian culture. Students who are “out” may feel resentful of them because they bear the consequences while their “closeted” colleagues remain safe. In fact, students who are “out” may intentionally bring “out” those who have made the choice not to disclose their sexual orientation.
- When your life is being debated, having to sit silently and let others speak for you instead of advocating for yourself is not life-giving. It sometimes feels like being unfaithful to one’s self and being complicit in one’s own oppression. Being “out” and speaking out means discovering one’s own true self, one’s qualities and gifts and finding a voice.

Theological Reflection from a Protestant Canadian Context

- In most theological schools, teaching and administrative personnel who are themselves lesbian or gay are usually not “out”. It is only by chance or luck that a homosexual finds out who is “safe”. More often than not, people learn the hard way where and in whom homophobia still exists.

Curriculum

Given the current climate of debate in all of our churches concerning the ordination and commissioning of non-celibate lesbian, gay and bisexual students, it is difficult but essential for theological schools to provide safe opportunities for discussion in a non-coercive context. The probability of the presence of homosexual students who feel unable to identify themselves as such must be recognized.

Below are some additional comments on the curriculum:

- Most curriculums only rarely and randomly include lesbian, gay and bisexual issues.
- For some time now, it has been understood that the classroom is a political space, where all socially located speech is political speech. The impact of this reality on the lives of lesbian, gay and bisexual students means that entering the discussion often results in criticism, rejection, expulsion, and even physical threat to their person.
- Today’s curriculum requires students to take their social location seriously. Lesbian, gay and bisexual students usually find themselves outside of the dominant culture’s heterosexual family values of husband/wife/children. In the classroom, students are asked to speak about the community in which they were raised and the role their “home” church played in the formation and nurture of their spiritual life. Due to the risks involved, homosexual students are unlikely to disclose any part of their journey of coming to consciousness about their sexual orientation.

Transforming the Classroom

The following are suggestions as to how courses might begin to articulate and address the experience of gay and lesbian students, and thereby create the opportunity for discussion of homosexuals’ experiences in the classroom:

- ***Biblical Studies*** courses could raise questions that address those texts that hitherto have been used to condemn the lives of homosexuals. In a more positive vein, Biblical Studies could be intentional about directing students to an understanding of the ways in which other texts support openness and inclusion of homosexual persons as created in the image of God.

Theological Reflection from a Protestant Canadian Context

- **Ethical Studies** courses ought to identify those areas of “right relationship” where standards of justice and love are the goals for a Christian ethical stance toward homosexual persons.
- **Historical Studies** courses could offer the chance to inquire into the past record of the Church’s relationship to homosexuals. This could include identifying the times and places where the Church has opened its doors, as well as closed them, to homosexual persons. The courses could also trace the history of various movements and groups that have struggled for justice for homosexuals both within society and the Church.
- **Theological Studies** courses could acknowledge that critically conscious gay and lesbian people bring to the task of theology a qualitatively different perspective from those who are “at home” in the dominant culture. The perspective would incorporate the stance of the outsider, of one who has been alienated. It would raise questions that stem from an intimate knowledge of heterosexism and how it functions within theology. The introduction of Queer Theologies, namely the voices of lesbian/gay theologians, could also add to the range of theological perspective provided for all students.
- An emphasis on the doctrines of Creation, Call and Ordination convince us that the Spirit is at work in and through the lives of both homosexual and heterosexual people. Homosexuals should not have to work at “self-justification” by asserting that they have a right to be homosexual.
- **Supervised Theological Field Education** - Students entering a field education situation face the real possibility that the churches to which they are assigned are unprepared to receive homosexual candidates for ministry. Those responsible for placements of students need to be conscious of the theological climate of individual settings in order to avoid placing homosexual students into potentially hostile environments. Supervisory and Lay Education Committees need to provide opportunities for supervisors to share their questions and attitudes towards homosexuality and homosexual students. Where a theological school has adopted a non-discrimination policy on sexual orientation, the policy could be used in the selection process for supervisors and their training, as well as in identification of field settings.

Theological Reflection from a Protestant Canadian Context

- Field education integration seminars could also grant all students the opportunity to reflect on their experience of providing pastoral care to homosexual parishioners and their families, as well as to heterosexual parishioners who may be struggling with the existence of homosexuality.
- Field education sites are usually the contexts for students to develop their ministries and learn about HIV, AIDS, STD's, drug and alcohol addiction, as well as developing the skills for ministering with bisexual, lesbian or gay persons. Discussion and learning is limited when information on these topics is not made available in the classroom.
- **Pastoral Studies** courses focus on preparation for ministry. Students are expected to be open and authentic and to journey in community with other students in the context of Christian faith. Education in pastoral theology requires critical self-reflection on who we are, and with whom we are in relationship. The agenda that is pursued within a theological community is both personal and political. Many students undergo major changes when they engage this process seriously. Changes may occur in their personal relationships, or they may decide to live life in radically new or more authentic ways. For some, the experience of engaging in theological and Biblical Studies can be the catalyst for their "coming out" process.
- Within Pastoral Studies courses, the "coming out" process could be presented in the context of material related to adult development. In classes related to "the family", for instance, we could acknowledge the effects of homophobia and heterosexism. For example, the difficult experience lesbian/gay/bisexual people have when they "come out" to their families could be explored. This "coming out" process calls for the ability to respond pastorally to relatives with diverse reactions. Pastoral care and counseling in such circumstances requires all students to identify and come to terms with their own sexual feelings, including their feelings towards homosexuality. Being homophobic ought not to be normalized or excused (e.g. "I cannot help it, that is just the way I am.") anymore than being racist or sexist ought to be.
- We have been socialized to believe that one way of being is more natural than another. Cultural traditions have taught us that in race and gender the white male is naturally superior, therefore it is essential that pastoral courses enable students to identify the socially constructed nature of deeply rooted beliefs and attitudes

Theological Reflection from a Protestant Canadian Context

towards those who are different. Because the world is generally unreceptive to homosexual persons, heterosexual students entering ministry in and for the world could profit from dialogue about how their gay/lesbian/bisexual colleagues could be supported. Heterosexual ministers might be asked to bury the son of a parishioner who has died of an AIDS-related illness, or to carry out a Covenant of Blessing ceremony for a homosexual couple, or to listen to the sister of the lesbian who has just moved in with her partner to make a home. Such pastoral encounters could be coloured by hate, even if the feelings aroused are rationalized as “loving the sinner and hating the sin”. A caregiver who lacks the necessary understanding and compassion should be advised to refer homosexual persons (and/or their relatives) to another caregiver.

Additional Suggestions and Conclusion

- A. Course texts and readings need to address the experience of homosexual persons, their history, and contributions to the work of theology and the subject of theological education. Classroom discourse needs to acknowledge the fall-out and backlash that befalls self-identified lesbian/gay/bisexual people, or persons thought to be homosexual.
- B. Assignments could provide opportunities for students to explore issues encompassing heterosexism and homophobia.
- C. Course options could include work on Queer Theology, Eros and Theology, and other emerging topics.
- D. Embodied pastoral resources need to be available: i.e. in the person of an “out” lesbian woman and an “out” gay man, rather than expecting one individual homosexual person to provide pastoral support to both male and female students.

The liberation of homosexual people from oppressive structures and practices within theological education could benefit everyone and challenge all to work towards a homophobic-free environment.

Suggested Reading

Countryman, William. *Gifted by Otherness: Gay and Lesbian Christians in the Church*. Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse, 2001.

Marshall, Joretta L. *Counseling Lesbian Partners*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1997.

Nugent, Robert and Jeannine Gramich. *Building Bridges: Gay and Lesbian Reality and the Catholic Church*. Mystic, CONN: Twenty-Third, 1992.

Theological Reflection from a Protestant Canadian Context

Riorden, Michael. *The First Stone: Homosexuality and the United Church*. Toronto, Ontario: McClelland and Stewart, 1990.

Waun, Maurine. *More than Welcome: Learning to Embrace Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgendered Persons in the Church*. St. Louis, MO: Chalice, 1999.

Theological Reflection from a Protestant Canadian Context

“We Need To Be Included and Involved --- Not Forgotten or Taken For Granted!”

by

Arnie Weigel
Professor in Practical Theology /
Supervisor of Contextual Education
Waterloo Lutheran Seminary
Waterloo, Ontario, Canada

Introduction:

The message is repeated again and again - both in mainline denominational congregations and in ecumenical ministries. Canadian Protestant small rural congregations frequently feel neglected, forgotten and taken for granted by the church at large, by the synodical unit, by the theological school. “We don’t count as much as the big city congregations do.” is how one layperson puts it. “We receive the graduates from seminary as our pastors, especially for first call, but few of these graduates have learned much about ministry in a small rural congregation. Most of their training has been in urban churches, which are geographically close to the seminary and which can afford interns. In our congregation, we feel strongly that seminarians should be immersed more in the culture of a small rural congregation, with such immersions including the contextual education placement of students, internships and the involvement of people from the country parish in seminary education.” These are the sentiments of a church council chairperson in a two-point rural parish where the average stay of a pastor has been slightly more than three years for the last ten to twelve years. “I know that we need to change with the times”, says the chairperson, “but we do not appreciate simply being a stepping stone. We believe that we have something important to teach the rest of the church, including seminary education. We need to be included and involved - not forgotten or taken for granted.”

Sabbatical Study:

It was exactly claims like these that led me to devote a one-term sabbatical (January 1, 2000 through August 31, 2000)¹ to exploring what it’s like today

¹I have been a member of the faculty at Waterloo Lutheran Seminary part-time from 1975 through 1983 and full-time since January 1, 1984. Currently I am Professor in Practical Theology and Supervisor of Contextual Education; a number of my course offerings deal with leadership at the congregational level.

Theological Reflection from a Protestant Canadian Context

being in a small rural congregation - both as a pastor and as a layperson. It was precisely concerns like these which motivated me to work not only with a focus group in designing the questionnaires but also to consult prior to and throughout the project with pastors and laity in small rural congregations.

This sabbatical study was undertaken with Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada congregations in the Georgian Bay Conference of the Eastern Synod; the Georgian Bay Conference covers the geographical area from Wiarton to Listowel to Port Elgin to Midland in Southwestern Ontario (14 congregational units with 11 pastors at the time). My methodology was that of a qualitative field-based study utilizing a participatory research model and process - questionnaire with church council members and semi-structured interview with pastors - as well as a focus on appreciative inquiry concentrating on strengths and assets, rather than the more prevalent focus on small rural congregations as a problem to be fixed, or a weak sister or brother in the system or a social unit awaiting closure. A number of assumptions that I carried into the sabbatical studies included:

- * Small rural congregations are often neglected and forgotten
- * Small rural congregations are important to the life of the church in Canada and in the world
- * Small rural congregations are significant in that they constitute about 70% of the congregations in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada
- * Small rural congregations need to be included and involved in the educational processes of the seminary; the small rural congregations have a lot to teach both faculty and students especially in terms of rural life and culture

Together with Anthony Pappas, I hold that: "Small churches have a unique ministry in the twenty-first century. Much of what they have to offer is what they have always had to offer: the incarnation of the living presence of God in real social relationships. ... The primary quality of small churches is their relational dimension. Small churches offer family-like connections. ... The second quality of small churches is that every congregation is, or can be, important. ... The third quality of small churches is their ability to enable spiritual growth in a natural and customized way. In a small church the pastor is not far from any member.... Finally, when it lives into its divine nature, the small church is a redemptive presence in society. The small church is often dismissed as quaint, old-fashioned, peculiar, filled with 'characters', and so on. While those labels are sometimes accurate, they can obscure a more profound truth: the small church is a subversive element in our culture. A healthy small church takes the prophetic stance that bigger is not always better! Powerful things are done in and through

Theological Reflection from a Protestant Canadian Context

small churches for very few dollars. In the small church, people matter more than 'success'.²

I was particularly interested in learning what makes church worthwhile for laity and clergy in the Georgian Bay Conference and how can seminary education feed into, connect with and build on that. Basically there were three concerns which formed the focus for the sabbatical study:

- a) What is it like today to be in a small congregation in a rural context? As a pastor? As a layperson?
- b) What are some leadership and support concerns of small congregations in a rural context?
- c) How can seminaries prepare graduates better for ministry in these times in small congregations within a rural context?

Four Distinct Yet Interrelated Foci:

In this article, I will devote particular attention to:

1) specific learnings relative to seminary practical theology emphases and contextual education matters, including field education student placements as well as interns in small rural congregations (Inasmuch as I am a faculty member at Waterloo Lutheran Seminary, the counsel offered by study participants and shared here will be focused on Waterloo),

2) the need to be intentional in developing collaborative leadership in ministry within the educational processes for seminary studies,

3) the evolvment and continuation of a particular course of study on leadership in a small rural congregation, and

4) what this study meant and means in terms of experiencing a significant partnership in ministry.

Specific Insights / Learnings re Practical Theology and Contextual Education

Within my sabbatical studies and as recorded in my Project Report [74 pages], both laity [over 150] and clergy [11] provided helpful insights / learnings as to what is expected of a pastor in a small rural congregation.³ In response to the question: "What expectations do congregants have today of their pastors in a small congregation in a rural context?", laity noted (not ranked):

- "visitation: there for us in crises and in celebrations"
- "flexible and approachable"
- "able to communicate with all age groups"

²Anthony Pappas, **Entering The World of The Small Church** (2000), 5-7.

³Arnie Weigel, **The Dawning of a New Day - Conversational Wisdoms from the Georgian Bay Conference - Eastern Synod (ELCIC)**, [2000], 30-31.

Theological Reflection from a Protestant Canadian Context

- “a good listener”
- “a good sense of humour”
- “an effective worship leader and preacher”
- “maturity: be willing to lay aside prejudice and preconceived ideas about what being ‘church’ should be so that our ‘church’ can be a response to God”
- “an understanding of rural life and culture”
- “the ability to adapt to difficult circumstances and what can be an isolated/lonely life in the country....Weather and/or road conditions can be horrible, especially in winter. A good sense of humour comes in handy during these times! ...an outgoing personality is an asset. ...open-mindedness, availability or flexibility to accept what could be a sudden change of plans (one needs to learn to ‘go’ with the flow)”

Clergy responded to this same question with (not ranked):

- ”just be there / be available and accessible / genuinely present”
- “spiritual integrity: scriptures and sacraments taken seriously”
- “they want the pastor to accept them as they are, yet willing to challenge them to become all God wants them to be and to be sensitive to the difference and to timing”
- “visitation, in hospitals with sick and with shut-in and generally with membership”
- “grasp rural culture, life and rhythms (seasons)”
- “empower, honour and respect laity, their gifts and their leadership”
- “to be there in the midst of crises and celebrations”
- “what they want are pastors who stay and implement, not suggest and leave”
- “there’s a high regard for the office of pastor, yet a desire for the pastor to be a real human being”

When asked about how and where best to learn these pastoral sensitivities and skills, as well as an appreciation for rural life and culture, both laity and clergy responded: “Within the context of a small rural congregation over a period of time.” “Immerse students in rural life and culture - include field placements and internships in the small rural congregation.” “We realize that it isn’t always practical to negotiate placements with small rural congregations. Yet, we believe that a more concerted effort on the part of the seminary needs to be made in this direction.”

Context matters. Context is both spatial and temporal and communal. Where we are, how we are in the here and now. How we perceive and experience “small” and “rural” matters. Culture matters. The way we are, the way we do, the way we live, the values we hold and embody: all this matters. How we perceive and value “small” and “rural” matters. “Many have attempted to *numerically* define the ‘small

Theological Reflection from a Protestant Canadian Context

church' - number of members, communicants, pledging units, and worshipers averaged per annum. We resist those data for the most part. Figures seem too arbitrary, as if describing a person as a 'hundred pounds of clay.' Numbers are most often used when *judging* the small church, singling out its inadequacies, or devaluing its effectiveness. ... Based on our experience and understanding, we have chosen to describe the small church *experientially* as a living, caring, changing community."⁴ In my sabbatical studies, I also chose to define both "small" and "rural" experientially including an emphasis on: How do I/we perceive ourselves? With what image(s)? With what attitude(s)?

Canadian author William Adamson underscores the power and the value of images: "Images are important for the small congregation. Images have power to motivate or to immobilize a people. If people have positive images of themselves, they feel a sense of worth, they feel capable and thereby will be motivated to live out these images. If people absorb negative self-images and see themselves as incapable or of little worth, they are likely to be immobilized."⁵

Lawrence Farris helps us appreciate that small towns, unique in character and cultural distinctions, present special challenges for pastors, especially for those whose models of ministry are grounded in urban or suburban contexts. "An almost universally experienced barrier to discovering the history of a small town is the internal image of small-town America [Canada] that a minister brings to the context. This image, no matter where it falls on the spectrum from small town as romantic ideal to small town as narrow and backward can blind one to the true story of a small community."⁶ Hence, the plea for immersion of students - contextual education students and interns - into the life and culture of a small congregation in a rural context.

Within interviews, in responses to the questionnaires, frankly throughout the study, both pastors and laity within the Georgian Bay Conference were literally unanimous in saying that:

** seminarians need to be more immersed in the realities of rural culture*

** seminarians should have field placements in small congregations in a rural setting as part of their training (3 to 6 months at least). This*

⁴Steven E. Burt and Hazel A. Roper, **Raising Small Church Esteem** (1992), vi.

⁵William Adamson, **Small Churches: Understanding and Encouraging Them.** (1993), 35.

⁶Lawrence W. Farris, **Dynamics of Small Town Ministry** (2000), 18.

Theological Reflection from a Protestant Canadian Context

would help them experience rural culture and learn from rural culture

- * seminarians who would serve in a small congregation in a rural context need to see this as their calling and not simply as a stepping stone to a larger and/or urban congregation*
- * the seminary needs to have at least one or two internships within a rural context every year, with funding provided by the Eastern Synod, the Seminary, and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada*
- * in the teaching of seminary courses, especially courses in practical theology, have pastors and lay leaders from small congregations in a rural setting participate in class sessions at the seminary⁷*

Need to Develop Collaborative Leadership in Ministry Within the Educational Processes for Seminary Studies

Participants in the sabbatical study expressed concern that a fair bit of teaching in the seminary appears to be feeding and supporting a “lone ranger model of pastoral leadership”. They were emphatic in asserting the need for the lone ranger model to be replaced by a collaborative, collegial model - expressive of “the priesthood of all believers” and affirming each person as gifted and important for the well-being of the whole community of faith.

Jean Morris Trumbauer, consultant, trainer and author of **Sharing The Ministry** states: “A major challenge for congregational leaders today is how to engage in the practical steps that represent living out our emerging images of church and of the ministry of the laity, both within the congregation and in daily life. ... More than a change of language is required to live out a new vision of church for our time. It necessitates new ways of structuring and engaging in leadership roles and processes....Shared ministry can be described as ‘living out the affirmation that God calls all people to ministry.’ As members of faith communities, we are invited to serve together in a spirit of mutuality as partners. Working collaboratively, we strive to discover, develop, engage, and support the gifts of each person and, as responsible stewards, to participate in God’s ongoing creative and restoring activities in our communities and the world.”⁸

What Trumbauer is saying here squares with what we experienced in the sabbatical studies on leadership in small rural congregations. Here are a few examples: “This church is like an extended family. We belong together. The Bible

⁷Weigel, 38-41.

⁸Jean Morris Trumbauer, “Gifts-Based Shared Ministry Systems”, **Congregations** (Nov/Dec 2000), 6.

Theological Reflection from a Protestant Canadian Context

tells us that we're the body of Christ. Each of us has an important part to play. We use our particular gifts in shared ministries." "It's a ministry - a mutual ministry affirming not only the importance of the ministry of the seminary to us here but also affirming our ministries as equally important. There's a sense in which our coming together has reinforced how we are partners in ministry." "The way in which this study has integrated a collaborative and participatory model and process is to be applauded. I've appreciated the way in which you have put a focus on strengths, on positive reflections and on appreciation. We really don't feel so alone any more. It means a lot to us that a seminary professor thinks highly enough of us to include us in the formation of a seminary course."

Roy Philips reflects on the significance of focusing on collaborative leadership. Says he: "The great new challenge for seminaries will be to train leaders of shared and mutual ministry as distinguished from the customary solo ministry. ... Among the practical abilities that seminaries should help to develop are skills in gifts discernment, in evoking the ministry of others, and in training, coordinating and supporting lay ministry. Seminaries need to address the issues and dynamics related to the ministry of the congregation as a whole. In the past, skilled leaders were thought of as people with loyal followers; we now need to think of leaders as those in whose presence leaders appear."⁹

Alice Mann puts the leadership challenge this way: "Unless a congregation reconnects faith with context in a fresh and powerful way, no strategy, structure, or program will make much difference in its long-term viability. Since the social context of the 1950s (or whatever decade was your golden age) will never return, discernment of a renewed faith identity and purpose is essential."¹⁰

Consider this reflection from my sabbatical studies relative to the challenge to embrace and to embody a collaborative leadership style: "The transition times in which we live present us with particular challenges. We understand that challenges are tough realities in our context that we must face in order to live out our vocation today and into tomorrow. But we believe that these are challenges we should not be asked to face alone. Although we feel that we've been neglected, overlooked and disregarded far too frequently, we also believe that together - with the church at large, with the synod, with ecumenical approaches, with imagination and creativity, with trust and confidence in God - we can face these challenges and learn how to live through them."¹¹

⁹Roy D. Phillips, **Letting Go: Transforming Congregations for Ministry** (1999), 22.

¹⁰Alice Mann, **Can Our Church Live?**(1999), 62.

¹¹Weigel, 59.

Theological Reflection from a Protestant Canadian Context

One of the challenges is surely that of leadership - pastoral leadership, congregational leadership in context! "Most seminary graduates start out in a small church, from whence an interesting distribution process occurs. Some, ill-suited, drop out of ministry before (hopefully) or after (unfortunately) inflicting much pain on themselves and a small congregation. Some find their calling realized and stay on for many years ministering productively in small church settings. Others pay their dues and move on."¹² With Pappas, I contend that one should not wait until graduation to address matters of leadership in a small rural congregation. Such ought to take place in seminary education!

With regard to leadership, small rural congregations also need to have opportunities to explore alternative possibilities - hence, the expressed desire that pastors and laity in small rural congregations be invited to join in on class sessions for seminary courses pertinent to context. "It is evident that the predominant form of pastoral leadership for the rural church will be that of licensed, commissioned, or bivocational clergy. Small and rural churches have been 'priced out of the market' of the full-time seminary-trained model of pastoral leadership, although many still cling to this model with a wistful yearning. Some yoked ministries are still able to support a full-time person but they are increasingly rare and are often fraught with the tension of a leadership style that is out of harmony with the congregational setting or that bears conflicting expectations. A fully trained lay ministry can provide a creative alternative to such dysfunctional relationships and empower the congregation in its ministry. Perhaps, in the 21st century, we shall see the Reformation principle of the "priesthood of all believers" fully appropriated by the church. The rural church may lead the way!"¹³

Evolvement and Continuation of Seminary Course: "Leadership: Small Congregations in a Rural Context"

There's an irony relative to this course on leadership in small rural congregations. This irony is that Waterloo Lutheran Seminary - priding itself in having a very effective contextual education emphasis in its course offerings - prior to 2000 did not have a single course on leadership in a small rural congregation. Another dimension of this irony is that Waterloo Lutheran Seminary graduates have generally received and accepted their first call to a small rural congregation. In a very real sense, Waterloo Lutheran Seminary was not equipping its graduates fully from a contextual standpoint. Although there were some courses addressing congregational leadership, there were no specific courses devoted to leadership in small rural congregations. There was a gap.

¹²Anthony Pappas (editor), **Inside The Small Church** (2002), 175.

¹³Ibid, 184.

Theological Reflection from a Protestant Canadian Context

Recognizing this gap, my sabbatical studies in 2000 quite intentionally moved towards addressing the need for a course on leadership in a small rural congregation. When I explored this intention with the people in the Georgian Bay Conference, I discovered deep appreciation in being invited to be a part of the genesis for such a course; I also discovered overwhelming support, enthusiasm and commitment to such a course. In fact, when I speak of commitment, both laity and clergy identified their commitment to this course as a necessity. Clergy identified this course as something they wish they would have had when they were in seminary. Both clergy and laity readily volunteered to be a part of such a course. To a person they saw the addition of this course as strengthening Waterloo Lutheran Seminary's contextual ministry emphases.

The course description which emerged is: "This course will explore leadership in small congregations within a rural context - pastoral leadership as well as leadership of laity. Small congregations in a rural context have unique qualities, call for particular leadership dynamics and present structural, programmatic and administrative challenges in the 21st century. This course will devote attention to the current and emerging rural context with its changing social, economic, environmental and technological patterns as well as the impact of these contextual changes on small congregations within a rural setting. Rural community, rural culture, and ministry in the rural congregation will be addressed within the course. Included in the course's proceedings will be seminars, case studies as well as guest presenters and dialogue partners from small congregations within a rural context."¹⁴

In reflecting on the nature of the course, the following aspects became apparent and were identified as needing to be integrated into the course's offerings:

- * a weekend immersion experience in a small rural congregation and its culture
- * each participant in the immersion weekend to complete a reflective paper on experiences and to integrate insights from related literature as well
- * inclusion of particular and current texts on ministry in small rural congregations
- * incorporation of clergy and laity from small rural congregations into the teaching of the course with up to 50% of the class sessions including clergy and/or laity as co-teachers with the course professor
- * although initially offered as an elective, it is recommended that this course be mandatory for all candidates seeking ministry in a small rural congregation
- * rural community, rural culture and ministry in the rural congregation will be explored in the course

¹⁴Weigel, 49.

Theological Reflection from a Protestant Canadian Context

- * the course needs to give opportunity to explore the merits of “small” and the merits of “rural” as well as the intrinsic challenges in each, especially in the twenty-first century

This course, called “Leadership: Small Congregations in a Rural Context”, fully approved by the Waterloo Lutheran Seminary and Wilfrid Laurier University Senates respectively, has been taught in the school years of 2000-2001 and 2001-2002 and will be taught in 2002-2003. Although highly recommended by the Georgian Bay Conference to become a mandatory course in the seminary’s curriculum, it is still an elective at this time. Course evaluations for the past two years clearly indicate that participants in the course believe that this is a course which must become a core course. It remains to be seen whether through a deepening and continuing dialogue with seminary administration such comes into being!

Experiencing A Significant Partnership in Ministry

Ministry is a partnership. We are in this together!

One interviewee reflecting on the processes of the study noted that “this study restored his sense of being in a community of faith - a community in which we honour one another’s gifts, celebrate those gifts and call them into service to God’s people!” Another interviewee said: “Don’t judge us for our size; see us for the many and varied ministries taking place here. We care deeply for each other. We care deeply for our community. We care deeply for our church. ... It’s the people - everybody knows everybody else! It’s the relationships - we’re all related to each other in some way. We participate as family. The congregation is family. It’s the fellowship - the warmth of the people, not only in the congregation, but with other Christians, with other people in the community - all this is really great! There’s a lot in small rural congregations which gives voice to the Gospel and which helps us live into God’s remarkable mysteries!”

As a result of this study, there is now at least one seminary course at Waterloo Lutheran Seminary on leadership in small rural congregations! In addition to adding this course focus, last year, 2001-2002, we were able to place an intern in a small rural congregation in the Georgian Bay Conference with joint funding from the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada, the Eastern Synod and the Seminary. This internship turned out to be a fascinating and stretching experience for all parties concerned. Truly a marvellous internship in the best sense of the word! The congregations came to believe in themselves as learning / teaching congregations; the intern came to see the many and varied realities of life and ministry in a rural context and in a relatively small congregational community. The seminary came to see that internships in small rural congregations are vital, do work and offer a lot to a seminarian; such internships need to be continued in order to provide a fuller balance in the educational

Theological Reflection from a Protestant Canadian Context

processes towards graduation and ordination. The synod and the endorsing committee came to realize that a small rural congregation has a lot to offer and is able to address contextual learning goals interconnected with the possibility of one's first call in a small rural congregation.

In short, this internship demonstrated how together we can strengthen partnerships, build bridges, bring congregations, candidates, seminary, synod, Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada into regular and ongoing conversations. Although often neglected, forgotten or taken for granted --- this internship also demonstrated how vast and varied are the gifts in a community of faith that gathers regularly as a small congregation in a rural context. As with the course on "Leadership: Small Congregations in a Rural Context", so in and through the internship we demonstrated how challenging, fulfilling, exciting and beautiful the learning process can be and is when we are co-learners and co-teachers in a context of exploration and discovery!

Canadian sociologist Reginald W. Bibby, whose *Project Canada* national surveys every five years since 1975, as well as his youth surveys of Canada's Teens in 1984, 1992 and 2000 have produced valuable and stirring insights as to the state of organized religion in Canada believes that congregations in Canada, including small rural congregations, have a lot going for them at this time. There is a yearning and a hunger for spiritual fulfilment, for correlating faith and life in meaningful and helpful ways. In his most recent book **Restless Gods**, Bibby affirms an essential process: "I remain convinced that if you want to know what people are doing in the religious realm and why they are doing it, you *have to ask them*."¹⁵ Having asked them, and searched through, digested and presented the available data, Bibby notes: "The churches are restless. Canadians are restless. It may well be because 'in the beginning' of this new century, the 'Spirit of God which moved upon the face of the waters' back then is moving across the country. What remains to be seen is what will be created ... this time around."¹⁶ So too with leadership in small rural congregations!

Indeed! It remains to be seen what will be created!

We need to be included and involved --- not forgotten or taken for granted!

Selected Bibliography

Adamson, William. **Small Churches: Understanding and Encouraging Them.**

¹⁵Reginald W. Bibby, **Restless Gods** (2002), 3.

¹⁶Ibid, 248.

Theological Reflection from a Protestant Canadian Context

Saskatoon: Adam Enterprises, 1993.

Bibby, Reginald W. **Restless Gods: The Renaissance of Religion in Canada.** Toronto: Stoddart, 2002.

Boulton, Marsha. **Letters from the Country.** Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1995.

Burt, Steven E. and Hazel E. Roper. **Raising Small Church Esteem.** Washington, D.C.: Alban Institute, 1992.

Farris, Lawrence W. **Dynamics of Small Town Ministry.** Bethesda, Md: Alban Institute, 2000.

Jung, L. Shannon & Mary A. Agria. **Rural Congregational Studies.** Nashville: Abingdon, 1997.

Lind, Christopher. **Something's Wrong Somewhere.** Halifax: Fernwood Publishing, 1995.

Mann, Alice. **Can Our Church Live?** Bethesda, Md.: Alban Institute, 1999.

Pappas, Anthony G. **Entering the World of the Small Church.** (Rev. Ed.). Bethesda, Md: Alban Institute, 2000.

Pappas, Anthony G. (Ed) **Inside The Small Church.** Bethesda, Md: Alban Institute, 2002.

Phillips, Roy D. **Letting Go: Transforming Congregations for Ministry.** Bethesda, Md: Alban Institute, 1999.

Sim, R. Alex. **Land and Community: Crisis in Canada's Countryside.** Guelph: University of Guelph, 1988.

Trumbauer, Jean Morris. **Sharing The Ministry.** Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, c 1995, 1999.

Trumbauer, Jean Morris. "Gifts-Based Shared Ministry Systems: Living Out a New Image of Church", **Congregations (Nov / Dec 2000).**

Weigel, Arnold D. **Congregational Leadership: An Art in Context.** Vancouver, B.C.: Vancouver School of Theology, 1993.

Weigel, Arnie. **The Dawning of a New Day - Conversational Wisdoms from the Georgian Bay Conference - Eastern Synod (ELCIC)** - self-published -

Theological Reflection from a Protestant Canadian Context

Kitchener: Pandora Press, 2000.