

New era of ministry calls for theological educators to ask new questions

By EILEEN R. CAMPBELL-REED

Between June 2020 and April 2022, I surveyed and interviewed more than 100 congregational pastors, ministers, volunteer lay leaders, chaplains, and recent seminary graduates to learn about the impact of COVID-19 and multiple pandemics on their work. From that research (read the full [#PandemicPastoring Report](#)), I concluded that we are witnessing a new era of ministry. The following proposes what theological educators can ask and do in response.



The study grew out of the [Learning Pastoral Imagination \(LPI\) Project](#)—a national, ecumenical, and longitudinal study of 50 seminary graduates begun in 2009. By June of 2020, we determined a clear need to track how COVID-19 was impacting LPI study participants. Thus, we launched a survey to ask about concern levels, decision-making, personal and spiritual well-being, and leadership challenges.

During the next 22 months, I expanded the study to include eight new pastors from the [Helping Pastors Thrive Initiative](#), and 30 ministers and 26 lay leaders from a [Pathways for Tomorrow](#) grant awarded to Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary (APTS). Study participants live in 20 US states and affiliate with more than 20 denominational groups.

Changing context and new era of ministry

Unprecedented, urgent, and lasting changes converged in the last 30 months, and together these trends are

reshaping the context of church, ministry, and theological education:

- **Cultural trends:** (1) enormous need for grief work over lives lost and ambiguous losses, (2) multiple, chronic, and long-standing pandemics like racialized inequality, healthcare disparity, and economic insecurity, (3) potential for new pandemics—along with global climate change, human migration, and armed conflict
- **Ministry trends:** (1) enduring hybrid engagement, (2) urgent questions about identity, purpose, and sustainability of ministry organizations, (3) greater appreciation and expansion of chaplaincy
- **Clergy trends:** (1) ministry resilience, (2) exhaustion and burnout contributing, (3) a “great renegotiation” of ministry jobs, (4) clergywomen and parents raising children leaving churches at alarming rates, causing a leadership gap
- **Theological trends:** (1) enrollments up in many sectors, (2) new chaplaincy training programs, (3) schools evaluating how to prepare students for the new era of ministry

Recommendations for responses by theological schools

Like other human agencies and institutions that endured multiple pandemics, theological schools experienced disruptions, adjustments, shifting enrollments, and somewhat surprising increases, with simultaneous and urgent demands for innovation and change. Now we face a range of choices about how we respond to the new situation with deliberation and greater intention. The following recommendations and questions offer ATS schools an occasion to engage the problems, the possibilities, and the role of theological education in the new era of ministry.

1 *Begin by acknowledging the new context and complexity of ministry requirements*

A majority of MA and MDiv students are preparing to work in a lifeworld of ministry. Although the subtleties and demands of that lifeworld are perennially complex, changes during the last 30 months have further complicated those worlds. Carrying on as if nothing has changed does not help students nor the people they will serve. Students need more grace and support. Faculty are exhausted and overwhelmed. *Ask: What is the impact of the multiple pandemics on our students, faculty, staff, alums, and donors? What specifics have changed, and how will we respond?*

- **Talk with your graduates**

Talk deliberately with your school's graduates to find out how they are doing and what you can learn from them, asking what they need for navigating the new era of ministry. Invite them to your classrooms and/or construct anonymous case studies to use in your

teaching. Use the findings of the [#PandemicPastoring Report](#) to foster curiosity and conversation. Graduates can be your most immediate and accessible



partners in educating students. *Ask: What can our graduates, who are deeply immersed in learning the practice of ministry, highlight for our faculty and future ministers?*

- **Equip with new skills**

With the new realities of hybrid ministry, seminaries may gravitate toward adding courses in technical and digital skills. However, seminaries also need to fill long-standing gaps in finance, administration, supervision, lifecycles of an organization, and ministry entrepreneurship. Seminary graduates need some basic frameworks in these areas. We have been hearing reports of frustration about these missing skills in the LPI Project for more than a decade, and conversations with APTS graduates confirmed the deficiencies.

Many of these skills are learned best in practice, and ministry is certainly not skills alone; however, schools can address these enduring skill gaps more effectively, and seminaries can help their graduates think theologically and spiritually about technology and administration. *Ask: What skills and frameworks do our students need to function well in their technical and administrative roles in churches, nonprofits, chaplaincy, and other ministry sites?*

- **Break down barriers between paid and volunteer leaders**

The #PandemicPastoring research revealed that volunteer church leaders hold much in common with paid staff and clergy. They experienced the same levels of concern, challenges from the COVID-19 pandemic, and profound losses and grief. Lay and clergy leaders also reported notable differences in the areas of self-care and spiritual well-being, personal challenges, and their needs for support.

These findings point to shared vision and ministry between lay and clergy leaders. When I asked lay leaders, "What did you need your pastors to know during the pandemic?" The most consistent response

was gratitude for the ministers, confounding a long-standing antagonism (casting lay leaders as barriers rather than partners) perpetuated by seminaries.

Ask: How are we helping students imagine collaboration and shared leadership with lay leaders in the places they will serve?

2 Teach to expand pastoral imagination

In the LPI Project, we argue against understandings of ministry that reduce it to skills, knowledge, or character alone. We make a case for understanding ministry as a subtle and integrative whole practice that can be learned with time. Building on the concept identified by Craig Dykstra, we explore how “pastoral imagination” animates ministry as an embodied, relational, spiritual, and integrative practice.

Ministry leaders needed to embrace both technical and adaptive change in the last 30 months. They acquired new skills rapidly, yet ministers needed more than technical skills or expanded knowledge or know-how for their leadership. They needed capacity for improvisation, salience, integrating spiritual well-being with leadership, managing conflict, creating and curating rituals for care and justice, lamenting publicly and privately, and weaving new future stories out of lost and broken dreams. And so much more.

Teaching seminary students the capacity of pastoral imagination requires thinking about our disciplinary specialties in a different way. It requires asking different questions, and it can be enhanced by using case studies. Cultivating pastoral imagination should not be left to field education nor clinical pastoral education (CPE), although they do it extraordinarily well. Faculty who teach in every area of the curriculum need to account for how their subject matters contribute to preparing ministry leaders for a new era. *Ask: How does my specific class prepare students for ministry? How does our whole curriculum work together to foster the capacity for pastoral imagination?*



• Teach to cultivate good questions

We can teach students to cultivate provocative and useful questions in every course. They will be “pulled up short,” as educational theorist Deborah Kerdeman suggests, because no one can anticipate all possible eventualities. Classroom teaching should continue to offer the best scholarship in every subject and teach students to ask “so what?” And “who cares?” And “how shall I make use of this rich knowledge?”

• Teach with case studies

Case studies can deepen each content area of the seminary curriculum. Rich engagements with situations, problems, and challenges—in all their complexi-

ties—can help students imagine the work of ministry as they move toward embodying pastoral imagination with greater salience, flexibility, and improvisation. Integration with biblical studies, history, ethics, theology, and the arts of ministry should begin in year one—not be left to the “integration” courses. Beginners need what David Perkins, author of *Making Learning Whole*, calls “junior games” of ministry so they can envision how many

parts fit together and where they can enter the game.

Ask: How can I help students see how my subject area fits into the whole picture and practice of ministry?

• Increase support of integrative sites

Every course in a seminary curriculum should include integration, and schools could also be more deliberate with support for “integrative courses,” such as field education and CPE. When I interview seminary graduates, I ask “what prepared you for your current ministry?” Field education and CPE top the list consistently, along with prior hands-on ministry experiences. Nevertheless, schools tend to under-resource and undervalue integrative courses.

Find ways collectively to value the teaching and scholarship of field educators and arts of ministry faculty. They already bring years of preparation and experience to the classroom and deserve recognition and adequate pay for their work. *Ask: What can the wider faculty learn from how field educators and arts of ministry professors teach? What aspects of immersive education can be borrowed to benefit all classroom teaching?*

3 Engage in corporate examination, lament, and grief

The last 30 months have been marked by loss, multiple pandemics, and growing needs to grieve and lament. If seminaries want to prepare leaders for a new context of ministry, then they can begin with corporate self-examination and invite students into the process.

Ask: How is our institution complicit in the wider public harms revealed since March 2020? What might an audit of our school's history and current biases reveal?

- Examine institutional racism and marginalizations

Schools teach an implicit curriculum of racism, sexism, homophobia, healthcare disparities, and other marginalizations when they do not investigate honestly the practices of the school. These problems did not suddenly appear since March of 2020, nor have they disappeared when they dropped from the daily headlines.

When schools embrace the courage to audit their historical actions and present practices, they begin to shift toward an explicit curriculum of ownership and responsibility. Such choices convey the significance of this work to future ministry leaders. *Ask: What courage will it take to deconstruct our past honestly? Who will lead the conversation? What steps can we take in both classrooms and institutional organization to disrupt the structures of oppression that haunt our schools?*

- Make space for students to learn the power and flexibility of rituals

Perhaps theological schools don't typically see their work as that of lament, grief, or ritualizing losses. However, there is wisdom in addressing the presence of grief that is weighing on hearts and minds. Telling stories and making space to talk are only beginning points. This grief needs the power of ritual, and we need to equip students to connect the rituals of their faith traditions with the work of grieving. *Ask: How are we engaging in grief rituals as a school? How will we prepare our students for this ritual work?*

More students are enrolling in theological education than ever before. Let's prepare them for the new era of ministry.



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Have you recently completed a research project that is relevant for ATS schools? We would love to hear more about it—[email us anytime!](#)