

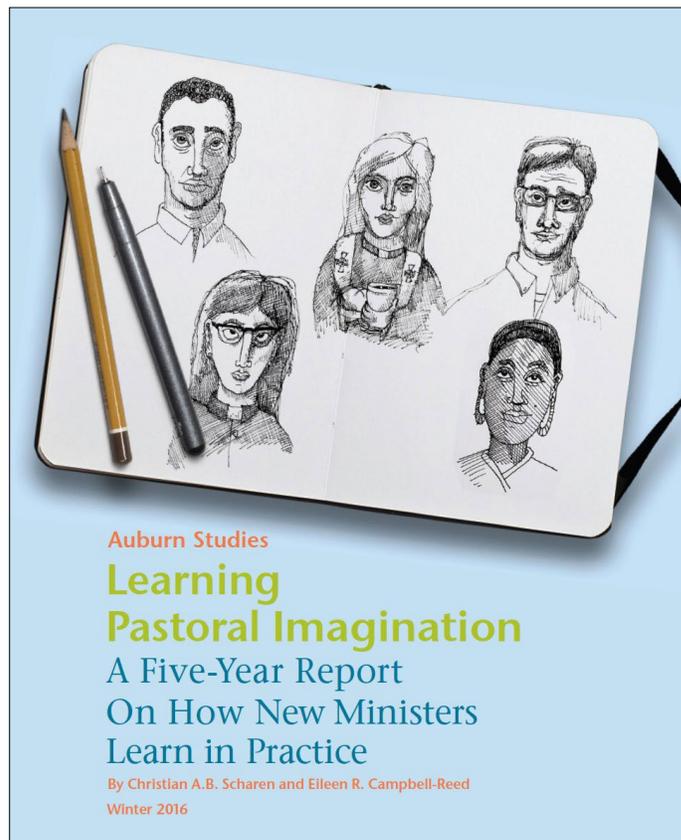
Are your graduates ready? Six key findings from the Learning Pastoral Imagination Project

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Springtime. And graduation is just around the corner. Perhaps you are wondering what kind of world your seminary students will step into after they cross that stage, diploma in hand. At the [Learning Pastoral Imagination \(LPI\) Project](#), we've been thinking a lot about that world and what new graduates need to thrive in ministry while leading communities and movements of faith through troubled times.

Our entrée to the world of new ministers is a group of 50 pastoral leaders who made the transition from seminary to ministry since 2009. As we follow them, we are also thinking a lot about you, their teachers and leaders in theological education. By observing what these new ministers need, and what as students they did and did not gain in their education, we have fashioned [six key findings](#) from the study's data. These findings capture essential components of theological education that will better prepare students for what comes after graduation.

Whether your students will be taking their first calls, or continuing in ministries begun before seminary, they will be stepping up to lead people of faith in a time of multi-layered crises in North America. Many interrelated forces are shaping our times:



- spiritual and moral unrest
- growing economic inequality
- exacerbating racial divides
- declining numbers of people affiliated with faith communities
- loss of both personal and social privilege and power by white people
- growing impact of climate change

These urgent and immediate crises are further undercut by the much older loss of practical wisdom, a kind of knowing that is embodied and relational and that gains maturity through rich life experiences. That kind of practical wisdom lost its cultural influence when reason and science took the stage as the dominant forms of knowledge production and acquisition.

Pastoral Imagination

Now more than ever, pastors and ministers need to recover the distinct value of practical, embodied, and relational wisdom in order to lead faith communities and movements through the challenges of our time. They also need that kind of wisdom for the everyday work beyond parishes, including work in hospitals, homeless ministries and many other faith-based nonprofits. “Pastoral imagination” is the term we use to describe this practical wisdom for ministry needed for everything from the ordinary to the visionary.

With pastoral imagination, ministers are oriented toward seeing the fullness of their situation—with all its complexity and holiness. Just as importantly, ministers with a robust pastoral imagination are poised to collaborate with the Spirit to respond with fortitude and grace. A pastoral imagination opens up a range of leadership responses that draw fully on knowledge, skill, spiritual sense, and relational insight. To embody such an authentic contextual wisdom requires a daily immersion in the practice of leadership on a long arc of learning ministry.

How do we help our students begin cultivating a pastoral imagination?

Findings

The places where you teach—your office, classroom, online course, or in the context of ministry itself—offer an incubator where pastoral imagination is born and can grow. Drawing on our research thus far, we distilled [six major findings](#) about what leads to pastoral imagination and how you as a theological educator can cultivate it in your students.

The findings are interrelated yet distinct facets of teaching and learning a capacity for pastoral imagination. Each finding can be conceived as a transparency in an anatomy and physiology book: one showing the circulation system, another showing the bone structure, and a third showing the nervous system. Together, the various pages show the key systems of the whole body in its complicated interconnections.

First, learning pastoral imagination happens best in formation for ministry that is integrative, embodied, and relational. Study participants experienced the most formative learning by immersion in ministry practice (usually through CPE or field education) and in seminary experiences (classroom or otherwise) that kept the horizon of ministry explicitly and clearly in view. As students engage in these immersion experiences, a common pattern emerges: (1) learners experience a clash between abstract knowledge and the complex realities of lived situations; (2) in that clash, learners are overwhelmed at the many variables they must sort out in a moment; and (3) for the learning to take shape fully, learners need a sense of risk and responsibility for how things turn out when they respond to the ministry situation.

Second, learning pastoral imagination centers on integrated teaching that understands and articulates the challenges of the practice of ministry today. Because learning experiences where students are immersed in practice are most powerful and formative, your teaching needs to keep such practice in view in all you teach. So whether you are teaching church history, biblical interpretation, homiletics, or spiritual formation, when students come to your specific courses, they need to see the connections between your subject and the world of ministry. When guided by wise teachers, students can find their learning will “grow legs,” as one pastor told us, and carry them beyond the classroom.

Third, learning pastoral imagination requires both the daily practice of ministry over time and critical moments that arise from crisis or clarity. While ministry is learned

in practice, your students will not learn all they need simply by putting in hours, days, or years of practice. Neither is learning for ministry forged only in the critical moments. Rather these two kinds of learning are best when they dynamically interact. As a teacher you can set up interactive learning by crafting classroom activities in which students are “pulled up short” by what they do not know. Navigating a simulated classroom crisis will introduce ways to use basic skills and knowledge in difficult moments. To help the learning stick, you can also make space for pastoral and personal reflection on the learning.

Fourth, learning pastoral imagination requires both apprenticeship to a situation and mentors who offer relational wisdom through shared reflection and making sense of a situation. Key mentors—peer and senior—were crucial for new ministers to make use of ordinary experiences and crises as opportunities for deeper reflection. As a theological educator, you can be among the first such mentors. In that role, you can show your students how crucial mentoring support is for preventing ordinary practice from stagnating, and for turning ministry crises into powerful learning moments.

Fifth, learning pastoral imagination is complicated by the intersection of social and personal forces of injustice. Listening to our study participants, we heard again and again how social injustice around issues of race, class, gender, and sexuality lead to “brick walls” that block and hinder their ministries. Students need resources and opportunities to exercise pastoral imagination about how to get around such brick walls before they go searching for meaningful ministry positions as well as preparing them to thrive once they land in ministry.

Sixth, learning pastoral imagination is needed for inhabiting ministry as a spiritual practice, opening up self and community to the presence and power of God. As you nurture pastoral imagination in your students, perhaps the most important facet to focus on is the core integrative capacity that sees the holy depth of a person, a moment, or a situation. By attending to the holy in your subject matter, and in the teaching and learning environment itself, you can help budding (or experienced) ministers develop

the capacity for pastoral imagination. In our study, we observed that even in quite difficult circumstances, opening up the sacred depths within a situation for oneself and those with whom one ministers, is the heart of pastoral imagination.

Implications

If you turn your mind’s eye again to your school’s graduating class as they cross the stage and enter fully into their callings, what do you notice? Perhaps certain ideas from the LPI findings connect clearly when you think of the world they are facing. Other ideas may seem less pertinent or remain in the background. The particularity of your tradition and setting give shape to how these findings will connect with the world of your students.

Our hope is that (1) the insights from the study foster good questions; (2) they assist you as you think backwards to design learning experiences for future students; and (3) they aid you and your colleagues with what Lee Shulman calls the “communal property” of teaching and learning in the variety of curricula in use at your school.

In the final part of the LPI report, we identify common themes that run through the fabric of the report. Here, we’ve framed them as provocative questions. You’ll find a wealth of additional questions for students, faculty, administrators, and churches in the [report](#).

- What happens when you shift seminary curricula from a textual paradigm to a contextual paradigm?
- How can you take account of the education and formation of the whole person—especially regarding the personal impact of social injustice upon students?
- How can you support developmental learning over a lifetime?
- What will it take to cultivate and support teachers who understand the full picture of ministry?
- How will embracing one’s relationship to God as the heart of forming wise pastoral leaders change the way you teach toward ministry?

We hope these common threads will spark more rich dialogue on teaching and learning. The complexity of the future for ministers and the seminaries that train them requires less in the way of singular answers and more in the way of becoming communities that ask the right questions.

To order paper copies of the full report, *Learning Pastoral Imagination: A Five-Year Report on How New Ministers Learn in Practice*, contact Auburn Seminary at 212-662-4315. Or view a [digital version of the report](#), with a tab to download or print the full pdf.

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