

## **Graduate formation and life-long learning in the context of ministerial vocations (Unbounding learning communities: Action-research in life-long ministerial formation)**

**Dr Steve Taylor and Dr Rosemary Dewerse**

**Proposal:** That the theological College should partner with local church communities, unbounding learning to offer it in “communities of practice.”

### **Introduction/methodology**

Formation is an essential part of Christian practice. Intriguingly, when it comes to the pursuit of ordination, disciples are expected to seek more formal theological education in the ‘formative’ context of higher education. When disciples return from higher education institutions, church denominations encourage life-long learning. How should a call for ministers to be life-long learners be understood? How does it interface with the particular habitus that is higher education?

In 2017 we set out to design post-graduate provision of education for ordained and lay leaders that would meet life-long learning needs.<sup>1</sup> We used Branson’s Practical Theology Cycle as our model – the exploration and critique of the concrete actions of the church in light of the gospel and of church tradition, in order to inform how the church lives and acts in the world.<sup>2</sup> Our research, conducted across 2017-2018, initially interviewed 55 ordained ministers within the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand. The results were workshopped with 230 lay and ordained leaders across the country. So here is the data:

### **Teaching leaders with their people in community: The PCANZ data**

There was general agreement that there is a crisis of faith across the Church. A real concern was that institutional postgraduate study would grow ministry leaders in ways so different to the thinking of their people; that it would create a loss of common language and create a divide too wide to bridge in terms of biblical and theological understanding. We were asked to create means for **teaching leaders with their people in community** so that growth could occur together in knowledge of Christ.

1. Those who participated in our research asked that theological education as learning in community be grounded in teaching **practices for living differently**.
2. The focus of theological education as learning in community, grounded in teaching practices for living differently must thus be on **educating educators** so integrated knowledge can be quickly shared, modelled, embedded and replicated.<sup>3</sup>
3. In a context becoming pastorally complex and in which “respectful communication and deep listening” seem to be increasingly rare skills, there is need in theological education for learning **in relationally embodied ways**.<sup>4</sup>

With the Practical Theology Cycle inviting us to bring our praxis-derived discoveries into conversation with scripture we found that the three requests from our participants in a context of communal learning were not so startlingly new.

### **Teaching leaders with their people in community: The Jesus data**

The education of God happens not in isolation in a hallowed hall tutored by elite experts but **learning in community**. Jesus startles the religious leaders of the day because while they are focused on details of the law he is focused on **practices for living differently** that put

<sup>1</sup> Rosemary Dewerse, “Listening Leadership,” *SPANZ* 67 (2017): 16; “Water for Seeds,” *SPANZ* 73 (2018): 16.

<sup>2</sup> Mark Lau Branson, “The Practical Theology Cycle,” <https://vimeo.com/13948078> (accessed 20/03/2019).

<sup>3</sup> Rosemary Dewerse, “A Report on the First Round of a Research Project,” 54, 64. See also page 16.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

compassion and justice for people at the heart and spirit and truth in the centre. Pedagogically Jesus is committed to experiential education – **educating the educators** - that empowers others to go and do likewise (Lk 10:1-12, 17-24). And the lesson is bedded in **relational embodiment**: speaking and receiving peace; eating with others; sharing their homes; curing the sick; teaching (Lk 10:5-9).

~~Teaching leaders with their people in community: Re-capitulation with Irenaeus~~

~~The case for relocating theological education~~

**Educational initiatives to honour what we heard: Telling stories**

*Listening in Mission* - was an initiative already underway. Delivered in five sessions there is time between for action. Leaders are given tools and equipped with readings and invited to invite others in their local church community to go on a journey with them of listening for the spirit of God in their neighbourhoods, toward ultimately discerning where they might join in. Leaders are trained online, who immediately train their group (face-to-face) in what they are learning. What is of most value for participants is the relational embodiment, the finding of companions in the ongoing community of practice in mission.

*Living Library* - Libraries are often under-utilised resources, especially if located in one place. Technology enables the unbounding of this traditional reality, however, as well as the unbounding of exactly what resources can be made available, and how. Leaders in the research asked for guidance on resources they would not have time to scope themselves, live access to stories and expertise from overseas but also around the country, opportunity for short courses and joining peers for book clubs or theological discussion groups. So we created <https://livinglibrary.org.nz/> to bring the resources of a theological college – people and archival, electronic, human and paper – to local communities, as well as to widen access to resourcing opportunities. The Living Library also enables the facilitation of their unbounded learning – a one-stop shop for learning via many means

**A new kind of education**

Our graduates will be leaders who are:

- creatively and critically reflecting on praxis in real time with and within local community
- modelling and enabling Christ-like practices for living differently
- agile educators empowering the people of God to empower the people of God
- integrating the whole self in relationally embodied ministry and mission

We suggest a commitment to these outcomes will enhance, not diminish the role of theological education. It will require a further set of action-research experiments in which theological colleges become a facilitator of graduate outcomes grounded in teaching practices for living differently, educating the educators, in relationally embodied ways.

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