

# Formed for ministry: A program in spiritual formation: Learning and praying

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"I want my seminary experience to form me as a person of prayer." We had never heard a student state this desire so eloquently and succinctly. We sensed in this comment something much more than a first-year student's desire for greater piety in the school environment. This student had done extremely well at a college with a strong undergraduate program. She was mature, intellectually able, and eager to study. Yet she perceived a need in her soul that she wanted addressed in her seminary education.

About this same time Duke Divinity School was focusing on the theme "The Love of Learning and the Desire for God," a phrase borrowed from Jean Leclercq's classic study of monastic education in the Middle Ages. We were convinced that the knowledge and the love of God is, or at least should be, central to theological education. Therefore, effective theological formation of women and men for ministries in the church and world, and for doctoral education in the university, should involve deepening their lives as lives of prayer.

Theological education ought to be about forming people for ministry, not simply conveying information. Information is important, but theological education must shape ministerial identity. Forming ministerial identity requires attention to the care and nurture of souls beyond the classroom as well as in it. Education and formation in prayer requires time and focus.

Even though we believed in the close connection between a love of learning and a desire for God, we had not fully understood or anticipated how much students felt the need to be formed through an intentional program of spiritual nurture. We saw

that the one student had beautifully articulated a longing that many students inchoately shared. As a result of her passion and commitment, and with strong support from the administration, a number of students organized voluntary spiritual formation groups.

Without such student initiative, we might have been hesitant to develop, much less require, a new program for students, especially one that demands more from their already busy lives. The students convinced us that more explicit attention to spiritual formation was crucial.

From this humble beginning, Duke Divinity School has developed a program of spiritual formation that addresses three pressing needs. First, students need more intentional reflection on the practices of the Christian faith. Among philosophers and theologians there is a growing awareness of the inseparability of identity and social-cultural practices. This helpful development provides an opportunity for theological education to move beyond placing students in the worn-out categories of theological liberals and conservatives. Such categorization often results in intellectual stereotyping that disrupts the process of equipping students for ministry.

Rather than being preoccupied with whether students are theologically liberal or conservative, we believe it is better to have students consider this question: What are the practices and convictions that form, nurture and strengthen Christian identity and life? This question compels students to learn to nurture themselves and others by a life of prayer that joins together the knowledge and love of God. Our spiritual formation program has the goal of deepening and widening the prayer vocabulary of students as well as building their confidence in providing spiritual direction to others. We want students to be excited about rendering spiritual and intellectual leadership in ministry.

Second, students need to nurture the interrelation of prayer, study and service. Theological education in this country, especially among Protestants, has not consistently held these activities together. However, we have found at Duke that theological education as a whole must be a consistent explication of the statement, "We are Christians." We must illumine beliefs and practices in such a way that one does not exist intelligibly without the other.

A seminary's success or failure ought to be measured by how well the interrelation of beliefs and practices is articulated, forming students to see their study, prayer

and service as a complex, integrated whole. Much of North American church life and seminary life presses a wedge between Christian beliefs and practices. Our spiritual formation program aims to make students more intentional about living out the deep connections between Christian beliefs and practices. Hence, we have asked our students to reflect in their spiritual formation groups about the impact of their service (in local congregations, social ministries or mission teams) on their study and their prayer.

The third need is to grasp the significance of “life together” (to borrow a term from Bonhoeffer) as the fundamental shape of the spiritual journey. We are keenly aware of the persistent individualism in popular Christian piety. Many students arrive at divinity school convinced that spirituality is an individualistic endeavor that may be pursued in commodified, consumerist terms. They need to discover that, while prayer and the spiritual life are profoundly personal, involving a person’s relationship with God, any personal relationship is also determinatively communal.

Through our spiritual formation program, we want students to keep important issues before them, including what it means to serve Christ in the church and the world, and what radically faithful witness to Christ entails. In the context of community, we want students to face themselves and each other by looking carefully and prayerfully at their past, present and future. This includes their lives of service, study and prayer, as well as their own journeys of Christian vocation. We believe the seminary experience should be a time of confrontation and embrace, challenge and growth, in the context of Christian community. The spiritual formation program intends to help students enter into self-reflection before God and God’s people.

How does the program work? Building on the voluntary groups, as well as a (no longer existent) first-year course requirement that included a small-group component, we have formalized a program that requires all students to participate in spiritual formation groups throughout their first year. All of our master of divinity and master of church ministries candidates are placed in groups of six to nine students each. Students are not allowed to choose their small group. We want students to be placed in a setting that will allow them to experience Christian community with people whom they might not have chosen as friends. We also want the groups to reflect as much as possible the diversity of our student body and the church.

One of the crucial decisions we made was to ask area ministers to be the primary leaders of these groups. We have sought clergy who are recognized in the community for their leadership, their spiritual maturity and their wisdom. We have sought people who have completed their seminary training and have been in full-time Christian service at least five years. These ministers reflect the diversity of the church in age, gender, race, denominational identity and theological perspective. Included are mainline Protestant clergy from a variety of denominations and a Roman Catholic nun and a priest.

The structure of the small groups is very simple: they meet together once a week for an hour to reflect on their life together in service to Christ. The leaders are asked to share their own joys and struggles in ministry and to encourage sharing by others. The group time must include some portion devoted to prayer and other spiritual disciplines. Some groups have adopted formal covenants, others have utilized the practice of reading scripture prayerfully through the *lectio divina*, while others have drawn on traditions of free prayer.

Students receive a grade of pass or fail for their engagement with this important work; attendance and participation determine the grade. To graduate, students must complete a full year in the spiritual formation groups. We believe that formal evaluation, though not graded, is crucial for stressing the importance of this aspect of theological education.

Finding group leaders for the first year of the program was surprisingly easy. Most of the ministers we contacted agreed immediately. However, some leaders were a bit uneasy about what to do in the small groups, and many of the first group of students shared that unease. This seemed an unusual requirement for them as students, and they were unsure what was supposed to happen. Yet at the end of the first year, the vast majority of students offered overwhelmingly positive assessments of the spiritual formation groups. The consistent refrain we heard from students was that this experience was the glue that held together their first year in seminary.

A surprising response came from the group leaders. The ministers consistently reported that being with the seminarians was one of the highlights of their week. Many spoke of being strengthened in their work. They often invited their groups for meals in their homes, and many groups gathered for more than the required one hour a week.

One of the most remarkable stories came from a pastor who said that, when he began working with his small group, he was fatigued and burned out. At the end of the year, we assumed that he would not be interested in leading another small group the next year. However, once the group ended he realized that it had revitalized him over the course of the year. At the end of the summer, when we were putting together the small groups, the pastor called and said that he would greatly welcome the opportunity to work with the students again.

To be more intentional about spiritual formation, we have appointed a faculty person in that area and created the position of chaplain for the divinity school. The newly appointed chaplain, an African-American United Methodist pastor with experience in a multicultural congregation, helps to coordinate the spiritual formation groups as well as the worship life of the community. She also meets one-on-one with students to provide spiritual direction and other support.

In this second year of the program, we have seen a marked difference in our incoming students and our returning students. Both groups seem much more open to the weaving together of beliefs and practices, especially as that weaving is shaped by the small groups. Many returning students are participating in voluntary spiritual formation groups, and new students are integrating their experiences into their course work in significant ways. This greater weaving of beliefs and practices has occurred partly because of a changing culture in the divinity school, but also because we are doing a better job of reclaiming in our classes the close relationship between theological reflection and prayer that has too often been sundered in modernity.

This year we have also invited lecturers to deepen students' reflection. In the fall semester, *Soul Feast* author Marjorie Thompson spoke to spiritual formation participants about what it means to lead God's people in worship and spiritual care. This spring we are welcoming Joseph Small, director of the Office of Theology and Worship for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), who will speak about the use of prayerbooks and the relationship of extemporaneous and written prayer.

A maxim from the Eastern Orthodox tradition indicates that "the person who prays is a true theologian and the true theologian is one who prays." We believe that a serious and intentional program of spiritual formation in theological education is crucial to cultivating the love of learning and the desire for God. Such love and desire is shaped by, and in turn shapes, lives of transformative service to, for and

with God's people.

Our program flows from the vision that Dietrich Bonhoeffer embodied so powerfully in Finkenwalde in the 1930s and described in his classic *Life Together*. "The aim," Bonhoeffer wrote, "is not the seclusion of the monastery, but a place of the deepest inward concentration for service outside." We hope, and believe, that significant attention to spiritual formation intrinsic to rigorous theological education will enhance our deepest inward concentration for service in the church and the world.