

Ministry and Praxis

Author: John A. Williams

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Introduction

This paper, originally written for the conference 'Beyond the Ordinary', which took place at York St John University in June 2009, discusses a Level 2 module of the York St John Foundation Degree in Theology and Ministry. This is the validated programme utilised across several dioceses and other church institutions within the Yorkshire region and beyond for the training of candidates for lay (and some ordained) ministries within the churches. Foundation Degrees were launched by the Government as part of the agenda for widening participation in higher education, specifically by providing for innovative strategies of workplace based learning in which 'academic knowledge and understanding integrate with, and support the development of, vocational skills and competencies' (QAA 2004). Since church ministries could be seen as the 'classic' instance of vocational activity, a Foundation Degree would appear to be the ideal form of training for such ministries. The module, Ministry and Praxis, models a threefold pattern of learning for ministry embracing academic knowledge, contextual awareness (requiring reflective practice) and personal formation (both practical skills and faith development). The module design, its placement requirement, taught content and

strategies for assessment and student learning support, aim to maximise the integration of these dimensions of learning.

Such an integrative approach requires students to make connections between academic study, practical ministry and personal development. It is this that invites creativity in teaching and learning: for example, a recent research report (Creativity Centre 2006) showed that National Teaching Fellows identified among the most salient criteria for creativity the ability to 'see unusual connections' and 'combine ideas'. Jackson's work on creativity in Higher Education teaching (Jackson et al 2006) argues that creative methods are demanded where situations of complexity have to be constructively negotiated and this fits closely with the nature of ministerial education outlined here.

Students undertake a placement in a church or sector-based pastoral context (e.g. a hospital or prison) other than their own. Teaching time is designed to supply a robust academic basis for learning by input on key areas students engage with in the context: e.g. styles of leadership and patterns of ministry, and to offer resources for their development as theologically reflective practitioners. The assessed work for the module is a portfolio in which students gather evidence for their learning in relation to theoretical models of ministerial leadership and practice as they identify these in the placement context, and draw out implications for their own developing practice. An interim draft of their portfolio is submitted for formative assessment to help sharpen critical reflection and formulate personal learning goals in the final version.

Theological models for ministerial education

The report *Shaping the Future: New Patterns of Training for Lay and Ordained* (Archbishops' Council 2006) offers a number of different models of theological and ministerial education as a stimulus to fresh thinking about the curriculum. In the section 'A vision for good practice in Reader/Preacher training', the task group put forward a threefold framework of Knowledge and Understanding, Competence (Skills) and Conviction (Spirituality) (p38). In 'Parameters of the curriculum', the relevant task group suggests a model comprising the three fields of Church/Mission/ Practice, Doctrine/History/Tradition, and Scripture/Hermeneutics/Homiletics. These models are different, as the second represents one way of dividing up the subject matter within the curriculum, whereas the first is based on a division of domains of learning (effectively, 'cognitive', 'affective' and 'psycho-motor' as in Bloom 1956, revised Anderson and Krathwohl 2001) that might spread across the whole curriculum. However, what both models suggest is that ministerial education is a complex entity in which (though differently expressed) there are at least three strands that need to be interwoven for learning to be made effective.

To explore this further we draw on the work of the theologian Edward Farley, who published in the 1980s two influential works on theological education, *Theologia: The Fragmentation and Unity of Theological Knowledge* (1983) and *The Fragility of Knowledge: Theological Education in the Church and the University* (1988). Farley (1988:137-8) proposed that theological education should be structured around what he termed the three 'dimensions of redemption':

- ecclesia, the context in which it occurs
- gospel, its origins and background in truth and in reality
- faith, the mode of living in which it is lived out.

Farley's model corresponded to his concept of theology as habitus, defined as 'a state or disposition of the soul which has the character of knowledge' (1983:13); 'theology is a practical, not theoretical, habit having the primary character of wisdom', or 'a cognitively disposed posture that attends salvation' (Farley 2003:19). In other words, there is a layer of theological education that is properly neither theory nor practice viewed as the poles of a dialectic, but better described as 'inhabited wisdom' that shapes and sustains the character of the person of faith.

A further theological undergirding of this point may be found in the concept of performativity, as developed for example in the work of Stanley Hauerwas (e.g. 2004). If there is an ultimate 'learning outcome' of Christian theological education then it must have to do with the formation of 'communities of practice' that more effectively perform the faith visibly and distinctively amidst the world. Where ministerial training comes under the wing of an academic institution that validates and directly or indirectly delivers it, this will always raise questions. Some partners (e.g. some dioceses) may conclude that the way to handle this issue is to maintain a separation between the 'academic' and 'formational' components of training, and to see the University as responsible only for the former, while the diocese operates a distinct programme for the latter. Others strive for a more integrated approach. Hauerwas has commented that there is often an assumption that 'the kind of lives produced by modern university curriculums will be critical of everything, believing in nothing', and 'the kind of training in virtue that liberal educational practice involves cannot be acknowledged, because the neutrality that allegedly is required for education to be for anyone makes it impossible to make candid that any education is a moral education' (Hauerwas 2007:56).

The challenge that the FDTM might draw from Farley and Hauerwas is to attempt to become a vehicle for Christian ministerial formation in the broadest sense: not just measuring students' ability to handle academic material appropriately in writing and to demonstrate practical 'know how', but to aim for the integration of critically reflective practices into the lifelong processes of growth and development that embed ministerial competence within the wholeness of a spirituality that authentically performs the faith. It is this integration that the present module attempts to address. The next section expounds in a little more detail a theoretical model for ministerial education that undergirds the practice described here.

Three-dimensional education for ministry

Theological education for ministry is designed according to a threefold pattern. All three strands are theological. It is not the case that there is a 'theological' strand and a 'practical' one. The three interwoven strands are theology formed through intellectual knowledge (Farley's 'Gospel'), theology formed through pastoral practice ('ecclesia') and theology formed through spiritual character ('faith'). All three are intended to be reflective in character.

a. A theology formed through intellectual knowledge develops around sustained engagement with structured academic resourcing. The role of a public minister requires funding of the mind, which in turn demands carefully designed input from those who have devoted their time and abilities to specialised study of the historical sources, documents, movements and traditions of faith. Academic credentials are not sought in order to compete in the crowded marketplace of scholarship, but in order to develop in candidates a well-stocked mind capable of standing in a critical, discerning relation to the traditions in which spiritual wisdom and practical ministries are being formed. A knowledge-based theology opens up a spirit of seeking in which the positive value of questioning and exploration is owned, endorsed and commended to others.

b. A theology formed through pastoral practice in turn comes about through exposure to the context and creative engagement with the critical issues it raises for church life. Ministerial training is very distinctively rooted in contextual practice throughout. The rhythm of the candidates' coming together at the University for resourcing and reflection is built into the educational process, but the focus is always upon the needs of practical ministry and the life of the local ecclesial community. In this way, the spirit of stability embodied in wisdom and the spirit of seeking promoted through academic knowledge are applied to the development of a spirit of service oriented to the interlocking needs of church and world, that is, to ministry and mission. This element is worked out in a collaborative manner involving parish projects and fieldwork, together with other elements of training that may be required by the church authorities. There is ongoing reflection on practice because candidates are training while they remain in the context in which ministry is already being exercised.

c. A theology formed through spiritual character, sometimes called 'wisdom theology', develops around the kernel of an inhabited tradition. People build up a fund of theological experience through the habits of prayer, worship and discipleship that comprise the Christian life, lived in companionship with others. Wisdom theology is about the

formation of personal identity through the rich resources of a shared and indwelt spiritual tradition. In this way, spiritual rootedness can foster a proper spirit of stability essential to authorised ministry. This is nurtured and sustained by reflective attention to the practical spiritual context in which the candidate is immersed and where ministry and discipleship are being formed in company with collaborative partners. The reflective attention that fosters wisdom is practised individually, with parish colleagues and congregation, and within the cohort of students.

Ministry and Praxis: the principle and the module

The principles of Christian praxis outlined above are designed into the module Ministry and Praxis in the following way.

As a placement module, Ministry and Praxis has 15 hours of contact time, comprising 8 hours of taught sessions, together with time allocated for tutorials with students, in groups or individually, and for student contact with a placement supervisor. Hence the taught component of the module has to be carefully and rigorously focused on supplying the robust academic foundation for the contextual praxis being undertaken through the placement. In order to harness this taught content to the module learning outcomes, the four two-hour sessions in 2009 covered the themes of understanding and developing reflective practice, exploring a variety of models and methods for theological reflection, theories of leadership and leadership styles, and the concept of vocation and the theology of various orders of ministry within the churches. These foundational elements are intended to provide a scaffolding for critical contextual reflection on practice as students both observe and participate in aspects of ministry and leadership in the placement context.

The placement experience is thoroughly interwoven with the taught input throughout the module, through the three hours allocated for students to meet with their placement provider to plan and reflect on their learning, and the four hours for individual or group tutorials facilitated by the module tutors. This tutorial time is essential for the cultivation of the habits of reflection that turn the placement activity into material for lasting ministerial formation. It also performs the function of formative assessment for the student's developing work on the module assignment, as students are required to submit an initial draft of their proposed portfolio with an indication of the type of evidential material likely to be included in it. Within flexible parameters, the portfolio is expected to include at least:

- analysis of patterns of ministry and leadership observed in the placement context, drawing on the academic literature to support critical perceptions
- pieces of theological reflection on selected aspects of the placement experience
- reflection on academic, professional (i.e. ministerial) and personal (faith-related/spiritual) learning and areas for development resulting from the module.

Reviewing the experience of running the module for the first time with the Portfolio as the assessed work raised a number of reflections. First, there is considerable latitude about what a Portfolio is and what it should look like. Some of the offsite Centres where the FDTM is taught were quite prescriptive about both the format and content of Portfolio expected of their students. Because the individual pieces of writing in a portfolio are quite short, there is a risk that harnessing these tightly to particular learning outcomes could produce over-'filleted' portions of learning that could lack the reflective integration of the three dimensions set out earlier in this paper.¹

Second, then, there are issues relating to the module's effectiveness in integrating academic learning, practical placement experience and personal formation:

(a) The 'academic' component has been delivered through four evening teaching sessions spread throughout the module. It is possible that this does not best serve the integration of academic knowledge with contextual learning; for example if the teaching were delivered early in the module it could then be referred back to more systematically as an agenda for tutorials, facilitating reflection with students on placement experience in the light of the teaching already

received.

(b) The placement experience could benefit by being brought into closer contact with the teaching programme delivered at the university, for example by expecting more involvement of placement providers (supervisors) with the process of the module. There could there be at least one meeting together with students in situ with their placement provider, but this raises questions about how much should reasonably be required of providers who are giving voluntarily of their time to support a student placement.

(c) Personal theological reflection could be practised more in the course of the module, for example by means of group work sessions providing a structured process of theological reflection with preparation and de-briefing. This could entail a more constructive use of Supported Open Learning activities to help students develop their reflective practice skills. Additionally, consideration might be given to introducing both the theory and practice of theological reflection more explicitly at Level One, to enable a stronger sense of progression to Level Two.

Third, the designing and delivery of a module of this kind creates an imperative for teaching staff to be committed to ongoing reflective practice (Moon 1999). It is not possible to retain strict control of the teaching and learning process when the students' choice of placement and the nature of the experiences they will gain through it, and the impact of these on their learning and how this relates to the academic input offered during the module, are all unknown at the outset. Insofar as the placement experience forms the heart of the student learning for the module, to be testified to and appropriately documented and sourced in the Portfolio, the tutor activities by way of both taught input in class, and individual tutorial support, constitute a scaffolding for learning, the precise construction of which may need to alter in the light of the edifice of learning the student is building. For staff, 'teaching' this module can never mean that learning and teaching materials are all prepared in advance and duly delivered within the parameters of the timetable. In some oft-quoted words of Erich Fromm (1959:53), creativity requires 'the courage to let go of certainties'.

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QAA , 'Foundation Degree Qualification Benchmark', QAA 065 10/2004, para.21 (2004).

Endnotes



For observations on the undesirability of over-prescriptive approaches to Portfolio learning and assessment see Baume (2001:15), who notes that 'learning is rarely the linear process of movement towards immovable goals that the use of learning outcomes can sometimes suggest'.

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