



Theological proficiency and the formation of Incumbents

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Among the indispensables of pastoring is explaining God's Word (Ps 119:43, Eph 1:13, Col 1:15, 2 Tim 2:15, Jas 1:8; cf. Dan 10:21, 2 Cor 6:7). Incumbents in Scotland's Reformed churches, for example the Church of Scotland and the Scottish Episcopal Church, need to be able to do just that. These two churches, like many others, authorise and recognise a variety of ministries. All ministers – indeed, all Christians – take solace in the Lord's words: 'When they bring you before the synagogues, the rulers, and the authorities, do not worry about how you are to defend yourselves or what you are to say; for the Holy Spirit will teach you at that very hour what you ought to say' (Luke 12:11–12 NRSV). But Incumbents are given a unique responsibility to preach and to teach the Word. For them, theological proficiency is crucial. Both churches ensure theological proficiency in the formation of their Incumbents with a theological degree from or validated by a university and, thereafter, provide opportunities for continuing ministerial development. Nonetheless, every once in a while, the idea is floated of dropping partnership with universities. This is a bad idea, for it compromises the surety of theological proficiency and the *gravitas* of professional learning and quality assurance.



Formation and ordination are the prerogatives of the churches

Jesus' three-year course with his disciples was only partially successful, at least as recorded in Holy Scripture. A fair number came on the course (e.g. Mark 2:15); a fair number dropped out along the way (e.g. John 6:66). The placements of an initial group of seventy went well enough (Luke 10:1–17); but there were mixed results from the first tranche of twelve graduates, Judas Iscariot in particular, that is if the measure of success is witnessing to the words and deeds of the Master. Fortunately for them and for us, unlike the pupils of his peripatetic predecessor, Socrates, Jesus' followers were not orphaned. The Acts of the Apostles records that following idleness and floundering, the Eleven regrouped after the Ascension and, with the Spirit's help after Pentecost, got to the task Jesus had left them (e.g. Matt 28:19–20, Mark 16:15, Luke 24:44–49). The Spirit would, indeed, guide and grow the fledgling Christian community from the backwaters of Jerusalem to the ends of the earth according to Jesus' prophecy (Acts 1:8).

Whilst Scripture journals Jesus' style of tuition, it is hardly a training manual for ministerial formation. One thing it does tell us, like the history of the twenty-odd centuries from which it was written, is the importance of the church. Acts 6:1–7 is an example. It speaks of the Twelve, the Hellenists, the Hebrews, the 'whole' community taking part in the selection of seven for ministry. Fast-forward to the twenty-first century and much is the same. Ordinands are selected from the church's wider community, but they rarely come fully developed as these seven did, who are not only of good standing and full of the Spirit, but also full of 'wisdom' (*sophia*). We may take wisdom here to mean the ability to apprehend things and to function accordingly, to appreciate theology and to apply it. The SEC and Kirk may presume the first two in their recruitment and selection (good standing and alive in the Spirit), but not necessarily wisdom. For that, say these churches, ordinands need training, specifically professional learning, the lion's share of which is the science of theology.

Remaining part of the many communities from which they come, even as they go forward for a lifetime of full-time ministry and therefore join a formational community or training course, they

offer themselves by the mercies of God and seek transformation, even testing, to discern God's will, seeking not to be conformed to the vicissitudes of the day but to be renewed (cf. Rom 12:1). A shade of risk and uncertainty is not alien to the experience of Jesus' first disciples, to the apostles and to the saints in general. Ordinands turn to communities of formation, especially staff practitioners and academics, for training. What they discover, and what their 'formers', ideally, will admit, is that *the* training manual is yet to be written. It is expected no earlier than the eschaton. But the training must go on.

In terms of that training, it is appropriate to tease out wisdom, or what we today might call professional theological learning vis-à-vis training for ministry, because churches have a particular end in their formation of incumbency-bound ministers that is different from universities. Churches train pastors, not theologians; one can teach theology without pastoring, but one cannot pastor without theology. In terms of higher education, theological proficiency is demonstrated by a degree; yet for a minister, a generic degree in Christian theology is insufficient. Universities that offer a BD/MDiv, in addition to other degrees in theology and its related disciplines, themselves acknowledge a distinction between ministerial practice and academic theory. The BD/MDiv may serve as a foundation for further theological study as well as for early-career ministers (probationers or curates). It is well-acknowledged that a theology degree does not warrant an ordination, but BDs, MDivs et al. afford the requisite professional learning for a minister, and churches would be remiss to ordain without substantiation of that learning.

Universities that assist in training for denominational ministry offer select BD/MDivs to meet the needs of their stakeholders; for example the five Scottish universities used by the Kirk's Ministries Council or the Common Awards (from Durham University) used by the SEC's Scottish Episcopal Institute. (SEI also partners with the University of Edinburgh's School of Divinity.) Whilst both churches hold theological education in the highest regard and, indeed, both require a theological degree (in addition to the completion of their respective training courses) for eligibility to take a charge, they do not equate theological proficiency with ministerial proficiency. The Kirk's training will include a probationary year and the SEC's a three-year

curacy on top of a degree. Noteworthy is that although ecumenism is given a nod, especially between Reformed churches in Scotland, neither the SEC nor the Kirk will send ordinands to courses other than their own denomination's, even if both courses will utilise ecumenical placements in field education. Common Order and Common Prayer may fall lightly on the ears of those outwith their respective folds, but for insiders there are substantial differences between things Presbyterian and Episcopal that are not to be papered over. Neither community will accept ministers from the other without rites of passage that feature the respective churches' identities, a certain body of knowledge and a placement (and, in the SEC, ordination according to its *Ordinal*).



Theory and practice in formation

A ministerial education, incorporating theory and practice, intends to produce a professional practitioner whose pedigree comes neither from knowledge nor experience per se, but from a holistic formation within a church's training course (and the presumption of a lifetime of ministry and development thereafter), where theory and practice meet. This nexus of theory and practice harkens back to the time-honoured recognition of (only) three professions: divinity, law and medicine. According to that tradition, ministers, attorneys and physicians undergo a specialized educational training specific to their profession. They are trained to be practitioners, insofar as they practice their crafts in the interest of their flocks, clients or patients, and not in the interest of gain, profit or industry. Yet, at the same time, they are not skilled solely in the practice of their crafts. They are, conversely, well-informed of the theories behind their respective arts, with firm grasps of their intellectual foundations and responsibilities to the community, by engaging in professional development. Medicine and law, to be sure, may have expanded their horizons à la gain, profit or industry as, undeniably, there are far more than three professions recognised in twenty-first century Scotland.

The focus on theory put into practice is, though, significant insofar as it would be foolhardy to reverse that ordering or to engage in amateur practice on real flocks, clients or patients. One does not

become a good, never mind a qualified practitioner, in any profession by a succession of hit-and-miss procedures without regard to the consequences, as if practice makes perfect no matter who gets hurt or what goes wrong.

Let us look to some examples. A medical student spends years in study before wielding a scalpel or prescribing medication. ‘Physician’ is a protected title in the UK. Someone using the title who is not properly registered commits a crime. The Government seeks to ensure that when one goes to the local NHS practice (or to a private practice) one finds a practitioner who knows what s/he is doing, both because of proper training and ongoing professional development. The same is true in the practice of law in Scotland. One has to be ‘a fit and proper person’ to be a solicitor with a pertinent academic qualification and a traineeship before being allowed to practice; thereafter, a solicitor must undertake a minimum of twenty hours of continuing professional development per annum.

Ought it to be different for a minister? No. Whilst there is little interest in getting the government involved, it is the moral responsibility of churches to hold themselves and their ministers to similar standards. An ordinand should spend years seeking wisdom to wield the two-edged sword that is the Word to counsel, in the name of a church, for instance, a young father who has lost his infant daughter to cancer about God’s providence. The Christian understanding of a steward of the mysteries of God does perforce demand a standard higher than other professions in se (for example, 1 Cor 4:1–3, 1 Pet 4:10–11), not in terms of the value of professions or professionals, but in the belief that the people and processes of training for ministerial discipleship and a lifetime of ministry answer to a higher Authority than any government or church. That is not to say that churches necessarily do well with their ordinands or ministers, yet it is to say that the onus is on them to supply professional learning.

If initial ministerial education ought to meet professional standards akin to other professions – with all due respect for God’s help without which we can do nothing (John 15:5) – and there are qualities peculiar to it, the question arises as to how such training should take place. It is serendipitous that at the forefront of education theory today is an emphasis on networked learning, especially with practitioners,

in terms of communities and connections. There are at least three overlapping communities in an initial ministerial training course: the community of the church itself, from which the ordinands are elected; the community of ordinands, as in Acts 6; and, more germane to our day, the community of practitioners and academics to whom the church entrusts the cohort's training and by whom the training course will be designed and executed to include the appropriate aggregate of theory and practice as mandated by a church. Again, with broad strokes, we could speak of a formational community, overlapping all three, to include the leaders, practitioners, academics and ordinands.

Both the Kirk and the SEC also take note of the larger, national, Scottish community by locating their formational communities in Scotland with an emphasis on their own denominations in the Scottish context. Unlike the Roman Catholic Church in Scotland, which trains its seminarians on the Continent, the SEC and Kirk believe that Scotland is the apposite training milieu for ministry therein. That does not demean training on an interdenominational or international course; instead, it underscores that these two Reformed churches see themselves so tied to the Scottish community as a whole, that they will only train their ministers where people live and move and have their being in Word and Sacrament, where ordinands discern God's call, where the people of God affirm it, and where their churches' ministry and mission are firmly rooted.

In terms of things practical, ministerial training is well-served in local communities within and outwith the church. Members of the baptised community and, indeed, anyone in a given time and place, are in a privileged position to participate in the formational community of their church, at least for a time, because of the formational community's familiarity with the local context from which the minister is likely to have come and in which s/he is likely to serve. (I leave aside the prospect that such ministers may transfer all over the world, thus mitigating the value of a local context.) Moreover, the non-ecclesial communities of expertise, with which the formational community must network from time to time with regard to practical experience, emotional development and professional counselling, are more effective when people are familiar and connected. In other words, on the practical side, Scotland provides an embarrassment of riches

for the training of the ministers who would serve her. Access to the community of practitioners – to those who are ministering in charges with all the attendant successes and failures, highs and lows, joys and sorrows – is invaluable. For the early-career minister, connections made and participation in local networks whilst an ordinand with practitioners, ministers in the field, is invaluable, as it would be in any profession.

Nonetheless, to start with practice rather than theory is to put the cart before the horse, even if this is difficult to see with regard to ministry. This may have to do with the fact that ministers are meant to be holy professionals, not wholly professional. One's encounters with one's minister are rightly deemed efficacious by the minister's witness to the words and deeds of Jesus, and by being loved as Jesus loved by the minister. Such efficacy, ideally, should be the case in any encounter with any disciple; it is not a privilege of the ministry. But there are times when members of the flock come to their minister seeking wisdom. There are occasions when the baptised query their ministers about the mysteries of God, when ministers are called to preach God's Word in season and out of season (2 Tim 4:2), even to adjudicate matters among their flocks with the wisdom of Solomon. It would hardly do to have ministers who are unacquainted with those mysteries, are ill-prepared to preach the Word in and out of season or are willing to abdicate their responsibilities to teach due to a deficit in their theological knowledge.

There is a temptation – prevalent perhaps in every profession – to be mistaken about the foundations of good professional practice, namely to gather that professionals do everything they do (and often do so well) because of their (good) nature (something they brought to their profession) rather than their nurture (something they acquired in training and improved and developed). Seldom do we find a physician or an attorney who would discount the importance of nurturing and say s/he is naturally a good doctor or lawyer. There is a good bedside manner in hospital; creativity goes a long way in the interpretation of the law. Yet, doctors and lawyers need to know their stuff, and they do not know it innately. They work hard, very hard, to learn medicine or the law, it does not just come to them. The same is true of theology and the things of God. The people of God rely on the Spirit come down at

Pentecost (Acts 2) and the Lord's promise to be with them even to the end of the age (Matt 28:20), but ministers should take a lesson from Martin Luther and Psalm 119 in terms of the study of theology with prayer, meditation and testing. Ordinands and ministers need to work hard, very hard, at their professional learning.

After all, the temptation to stress nature over nurture seems stronger in ministry than in other professions. Good ministry is often thought to be the result of the minister as just perchance being a nice person. Now, certainly every minister – every person – should be nice, but nice only goes so far. A good disposition, a key quality in any profession, does not make a good minister per se. Ministers worth their salt will tell anyone who will listen how important academic study is for their ministry and professional development. They know that study and experience go hand-in-hand. But they know there is more in ministry. The deepest learning will come from walking alongside the Lord on the Emmaus road of ministry (Luke 24:13–27). They will be the first to point out that they have learned a lot and hope to learn more as they continue on the way. Notwithstanding, there lurks a curious preconception in many echelons of the churches that practice trumps theory in training and that formational communities need only inculcate people skills. This mindset would see theology as peripheral to a minister's ken and, thereby, put undue emphasis on practice in initial ministerial formation without taking cognisance of the time-tested sagacity of curacies and probationary posts where the expertise is gradually acquired upon the foundation of theory, that is, theology. It is the other way around, in fact: practice comes after the arduous work of learning within a formational community, wherein field education is driven by its basis in theological reflection in initial ministerial training.

The Kirk and the SEC both have strong intellectual histories in their ministerial training traditions and courses. At the moment, their ministers' degrees come from or are validated by universities. The stress, to be sure, is rightly on the formation of the whole person, but quality-assured study is *sine qua non*. Although schools of divinity and departments of theology and ministry have their faults (and they are many), and universities answer to a pantheon of (demi)gods other than the One, they maintain theological curricula akin to the curricula

of comparable professions in higher education institutions for professional learning. These degrees are regularly reviewed by experts within and outwith the field; they are recognized by other educational bodies, especially important for postgraduate study, and professional societies; and they offer vital electives like biblical languages for those disposed to further studies than those required for ordination. They also allow ordinands to be exposed to full-time theologians (some of whom are also ministers themselves). Theological proficiency cannot be created from air: *nemo dat quod non habet*. Part-and-parcel of partnering with universities is their library services, including books, journals and a host of media. These, too, are expensive, but available. As Reformed Christians, we are especially mindful of texts and their importance to our learning. There is no substitute for them. While we may not go so far as to be people of one book as in John Wesley's infamous quote – 'Let me be *homo unius libri*' – I should think that we want our ordinands to be endeared to books and learning and to have reasonable access to them.



A proper theological education

A proper theological education is not something formational communities can do on their own – at least not at the moment – because such academic prowess is expensive, administratively time-consuming and demanding of a large staff. Nonetheless, churches are often lured to think it better for them do the 'education bit' on their own, to think that because there is a good deal of ministerial experience within a given church there is by default the talent to train ministers on every level, even the academic. Still, churches training on their own ordinands is a delicate issue, indeed. There is no question that selection, training and ordination are the prerogatives of the churches. That is a given. There is also no question that local contexts provide a wealth of clergy and laity with pastoral experience, many of whom are theologically proficient themselves. That, too, is a given. Yet those laity and clergy are not necessarily skilled or educated to the level required to teach theology on a graduate level, the level that the SEC and Kirk require of their incumbents. The SEC and Kirk would do well to sponsor such individuals for further studies to staff

their formational communities. They would do well to seek out bi-vocational staff, especially ministers, whose experience as ministers is *sui generis* in ministerial formation. Care needs to be taken here: theology teachers – in universities, formational communities and elsewhere – are not self-certified by their passion or interest. They need to hold proper, earned postgraduate degrees in the subject areas they teach as a minimum qualification. Much lip service is given today to bi-vocational ministry, but it must be kept in mind that being bi-vocational is being externally and fully certified in two fields, not in one with a keenness for another. For example, a bi-vocational accountant-dentist is a person who holds the ACA *and* a BDS, not an accountant with a passion for teeth or a dentist with an interest in HMRC. Ministering and teaching theology – and this includes practical theology – are distinct professions, despite overlaps, and each needs to be respected as such.

Allow me two professional analogies, again with law and medicine. A local area may be home to excellent courts, but that does not mean it is tooled-up to open a law school; or, the same area may have an outstanding hospital, but that does not mean it is ready to start a medical school; even if this imaginary area is a fantastic place for field education and post-graduate practical experience, even if ripe for a school of law or medicine, establishing such a school is another thing entirely vis-à-vis recognized and accredited training in theory and practice. These professions, like our own, acknowledge that excellence on the local level is best served by criteria, standards etc. set on the wider level.



Conclusion

We do well to honour professional learning standards in our initial ministerial education. Professional learning is not a cure-all for the difficulties that bedevil ordinands and ministers. It will not make them good; it will not make them nice; it will never hold a candle to the flame of the Holy Spirit. But teaching and learning theology are highly valued in Scripture (e.g. in James 3, 2 Timothy 1 and Titus 1) and throughout church history.

Theological proficiency is essential for pastoral ministry. Partnering and networking with select universities is the only way open to maintain quality assurance thereof. If we keep an eye on the teaching and learning (and the lifelong learning and development) of other professions, we see that no training course is static. *The* training course for any profession has yet to be cast in stone, much less training courses for ministers in Scotland or elsewhere. Initial ministerial education courses, like churches are always being (re) formed according to the Word of God. Paul's words to Timothy are apropos. If there is one thing our initial ministerial education should do, it is to create formational communities that network with eminent higher learning institutions of theology, so that our ordinands will be able to present themselves to God as ones approved by him, as workers who have no need to be ashamed, 'rightly explaining the word of truth' (2 Tim 2:15).