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## MINISTRY AS SPIRITUAL PRACTICE: HOW PASTORS LEARN TO SEE AND RESPOND TO THE ‘MORE’ OF A SITUATION

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### Abstract

Christian ministry in a changing and challenging context requires “pastoral imagination,” a capacity to perceive the “more” in a situation and act wisely in response. Case studies from the Learning Pastoral Imagination Project show how ministers learn—through everyday pastoral practice and particular moments of ministry—to engage the “more” in situations by 1) seeing what is actually there, 2) recognizing the theological stakes, 3) knowing how to respond, and 4) responding in ways deeply connected to the community of faith and its participation in God. The dynamic of learning over time is key to understanding ministry as spiritual practice.

### Introduction

Christian ministry in a changing and challenging context requires “pastoral imagination,” a capacity to perceive the “more” in a situation and to act wisely in response. Pastoral imagination not only sees the empirical realities, but also with eyes of faith perceives the presence and work of God, and what a fitting response allows for participating in God.<sup>1</sup> Cultivating a capacity for perception is fundamental to ministry as a spiritual

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Fiddes, *Participating in God: A Pastoral Doctrine of the Trinity* (London, UK: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2000).

practice.<sup>2</sup> Stories drawn from the Learning Pastoral Imagination Project show the spiritual character of pastoral imagination both in *how* pastors learn to see the “more” and *what* is included in the “more.” Pastors learn through everyday practice and particular moments of ministry to engage the “more.” By immersing themselves in the situation of ministry, they accumulate multiple cases over time, learning through practice how ministry as a spiritual practice requires taking risks, being overwhelmed, and feeling the disjuncture between knowledge and practice.<sup>3</sup>

### *Scope of Research*

The Learning Pastoral Imagination Project is the first major longitudinal, national, and ecumenical study of ministry in practice.<sup>4</sup> At the heart of our study, we are following fifty pastoral leaders recruited from ten seminaries and now serving a wide variety of ministry contexts. Our primary research method is day-long group interviews. We completed one round of interviews during participants’ final year of seminary (2009-2010) and a second round 18-24 months later (2011-2012). We intend to continue interviewing this group, anticipating a next round of interviews when ministers are four to five years beyond graduation (2014-2015). We engage in participant observation in several congregations of study participants and interview groups of lay people in those churches.

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<sup>2</sup> Kathleen A. Cahalan, *Introducing the Practice of Ministry* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2010), 113-16. Cahalan offers a working definition of spirituality as ways we “strive to be in communion with God...cultivate experience of God’s presence...be changed in and through this relationship.” Cahalan also argues that ministry is not a form of elite spiritual practice and that vocational ministry is supported by a variety of spiritual practices. Specifically we are developing an idea of spiritual practice in ministry that is an embodied and relational experience of God’s presence.

<sup>3</sup> The three common experiences of immersion in the practice of ministry are developed conceptually in Campbell-Reed and Scharen, “‘Holy cow! This stuff is real!’ From Imagining Ministry to Pastoral Imagination,” *Teaching Theology and Religion*, vol. 14, No. 4 (October, 2011).

<sup>4</sup> The LPI Project is generously funded by the Lilly Endowment (Grant # 2008 1196-000).

Participants in the study include primarily ordained but also lay ministers serving in Orthodox, Pentecostal, Evangelical and Mainline Protestant, and Roman Catholic contexts. Nearly equal numbers of men and women live in every region of the United States. The group includes ministers who are African-American, Hispanic, Asian, and Caucasian. The group also includes ministers who are straight, gay, single, partnered, parents, and grandparents. The new ministers range in age from the mid-twenties to the mid-sixties, with a median age of thirty-four.<sup>5</sup> The rich diversity of the participants offers compelling insight into how, in a variety of contexts, ministers learn and embody pastoral imagination.

### *Pastoral Imagination in the Context of Ministry in America*

Major upheavals in the religious landscape in America in the last century set in motion at least three major shifts to Christian ministry and theological education. These shifts require new understandings of the person and work of the pastor, and a renewed sense of ministry as spiritual practice. First among these changes, many pastors no longer learn by the holistic “apprenticeship model” but rather through multiple apprenticeships of knowledge, skill, and character formation present in the professional degree programs of theological education schools.<sup>6</sup> Spiritual attentiveness is no longer caught or taught in a one-to-one relationship with an experienced minister

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<sup>5</sup> The median age of 34 reflects participants’ ages at the first interviews with seminarians (2009-10).

<sup>6</sup> Charles R. Foster et al., *Educating Clergy: Teaching Practices and Pastoral Imagination* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2006). Foster et al., following Sullivan’s observation of professional education, argue that educating clergy requires three apprenticeships to prepare ministers for their work: 1) a cognitive apprenticeship to gain necessary knowledge, 2) a practical apprenticeship to learn the requisite skills of ministry; and 3) a “normative apprenticeships of professional identity” 7, 25-26, passim. A number of denominations continue to require a year or more internship work (i.e., Lutheran, Episcopal, and Roman Catholic). Jeffrey L. Tribble, Sr., *Transformative Leadership in the Black Church* (New York: Palgrave, 2005), 32-38, gives an account of mentoring for pastoral leadership in a Christian Methodist Episcopal tradition.

over time, and the pieces of the ministry puzzle remain to be integrated by individual ministers.<sup>7</sup> The second major shift is a response to the first: pastors and theological educators focus less on role and identity and more on practice and prudence, depending on multiple mentors and peers to support their formation for ministry.<sup>8</sup> Recently, theological schools have increased their attention to spiritual formation, yet, the necessary attention to practice and making use of knowledge learned in seminary classrooms often still lacks an integrating impulse that only time immersed in ministry makes possible. The question of *how* this integration occurs is central for our research with ministers. Finally, pastoral ministry is no longer exclusively comprised of ordained men in narrowly defined pastoral roles. Women are serving in greater numbers as pastors, and pastoral ministry has been expanded to include a greater diversity of vocations.<sup>9</sup> The expanded ways of understanding pastoral ministry and the greater number of women entering pastoral vocations change the context in which ministry unfolds over time. These clear shifts in ministry give rise to the concept of pastoral imagination, and they underscore the necessity for research into the concrete trajectories people follow as they become mature pastoral leaders.<sup>10</sup> Together the historic shifts invite a new understanding of *ministry as spiritual practice*. Better understanding of ministry as spiritual practice, grounded

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<sup>7</sup> The ELCA is a major exception among mainline denominations in America as it still requires a full year of pastoral apprenticeship in a congregation as a requirement for ordination.

<sup>8</sup> See Cahalan, *Introducing the Practice of Ministry*, 120-129; and James P. Wind and David J. Wood, *Becoming a Pastor: Reflections on the Transition into Ministry—An Alban Institute Special Report* (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2008).

<sup>9</sup> Jackson Carroll, *God's Potters: Pastoral Leadership and the Shaping of Congregations* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006), 7. For 2012 statistics, see Eileen Campbell-Reed, "Baptists in Tension: The Status of Women's Leadership and Ministry, 2012," in *The Review and Expositor* (April, 2013), 49-64.

<sup>10</sup> See Christian Scharen, "Learning Ministry over Time: Embodying Practical Wisdom," in *For Life Abundant: Practical Theology, Theological Education and Christian Ministry*, eds. Dorothy C. Bass and Craig Dykstra (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 265-288.

in concrete experience, offers support for pastoral vocations and also responds to the recent shifts.

### **Malinda's Story: Showing Ministry as Spiritual Practice**

Malinda, twenty-six, didn't spend her early childhood in church.<sup>11</sup> Her parents divorced when she was young, and Malinda spent many weekends with her non-religious mother. Her father did not take her to a Christian church until late elementary school. She says, "I had a pretty unstable childhood, so the times that I did go to church, it was a safe place." She found adults to look up to and a place of belonging in the youth group. Although Malinda "always felt like a Christian," she reached a "point of conversion," late in her childhood. She remembers feeling "depressed and suicidal" and coming to a time when she says, "I really felt like I had to lay down my life before God." Following that experience, Malinda felt like her life was no longer her own, but God's. Her church urged everyone to understand God's calling for their lives, so Malinda says she often prayed, "God, what do you want me to do with my life? Please show me."

As a teenager, Malinda experienced a powerful first-hand encounter with the sacred. After spending a day alone worshiping by a lake, Malinda heard God's voice promising to be present and to help her any time she spoke. Malinda felt very excited by the experience, having felt a tugging toward ministry for a while. This moment confirmed her call to ministry. In the months and years that followed, Malinda struggled with intellectual doubts and initial apathy from her family, as well as a response from her pastor she found disappointing.<sup>12</sup> Yet she

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<sup>11</sup> Names and some non-essential details and characteristics have been changed in the case to provide anonymity.

<sup>12</sup> Malinda's feelings of disappointment and lack of support resonate with recent findings by Sheryl Sandberg (with Nell Scovell) in *Lean In: Women, Work and the Will to Lead* (New York: Knoff, 2013). The book identifies numerous research findings, describing in detail not only an achievement gap between women and men, but also an ambition gap for working women. The cultural expectations for success remain lower for women than men in numerous professions. And women do not see themselves nearly as often as

persistently hung on to the memory of God's voice and presence as a powerful force in her life.

Malinda's pastor advised her first to "make sure you know that your call is from God," and second to have that calling "confirmed in the church," urging her involvement in church and school. Malinda was initially offended by the advice, thinking it a dismissal of her experience. Later, however, she could see the value in it, especially because the pastor found ways to invite her leadership in the church and youth group. After graduating from high school she spent a summer interning at the same church. Malinda says, "I loved every minute of it. I felt at home. I was finally doing ministry."

In college Malinda studied classics, making preparation for seminary her highest priority. In her senior year she wrote a capstone thesis about predestination, wrestling with the thorniest concept of her Reformed tradition. Malinda says she did not fully untangle the arguments or "reconcile it intellectually," yet she found writing the thesis liberating. Eventually a trip to Israel during seminary allowed her to witness first hand "the gracious character of God for his [sic] people Israel." She saw God's mercy even in "the midst of war" and felt God's presence was "palpable." She says the trip opened her to "a loving encounter with the God who acts with mercy and graciousness towards all his children rather than of a God I needed to understand and question." She felt first hand "God's love for people even when they have messed up." Regarding her own faith tradition, Malinda felt as if "God brought me back...and it was not my own doing."

A powerful confirmation for ministry came for Malinda in her second year of seminary when she

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desiring or achieving success in the workplace. Another study finds the ambitions of young women are "converging" with those of men, and both are seeking workplaces that "accommodate personal and family values as part of the way they accomplish their work." See "Millennials and the Corporate World Executive Summary" <http://www.bentley.edu/centers/center-for-women-and-business/millennials-and-corporate-world> (accessed July 24, 2013)

returned to preach at her home congregation. Earlier that summer she began learning in Clinical Pastoral Education how ministry requires slowing down, focusing on the moment, and really being present with people. She brought this learning into the pulpit when she preached for her home congregation. Malinda recalls, “It all came together, and I preached a really good sermon and afterwards people said, “This is what you were meant to be doing.””

The summer after Malinda graduated from seminary, a small, rural church in the Southern U.S. called her as pastor. She is the only full-time staff person in a congregation that has employed a succession of pastors serving brief tenures. When she started, Malinda asked church leaders about a job description. The reply was: “No, the pastor does whatever they want.” In her first year, Malinda learned that the congregation had very little knowledge or confidence about their own leadership abilities, expecting she would do most of the work, and fearing she would soon depart for a bigger congregation. Everyone in the congregation wanted her to visit, yet she often learned about church family illnesses and deaths after the fact and second-hand. She hoped for a first call with “lots of systems in place” she could learn from, but what she found were few, if any, working systems for ministry. The conflicting expectations created a set of double-binds for Malinda.<sup>13</sup>

Malinda tackled the challenges head on. She dove into the relationships and everyday work of ministry, taking risks and owning her responsibility for the work. She decided to create a training event for the Church Council, adapting a class project on church polity (she said, with irony in her voice, “*Something* came in handy from seminary!”). At times she was overwhelmed by her situation, and saw herself on a “steep learning curve.”

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<sup>13</sup> Christie Cozad Neuger, *Counseling Women: A Narrative Pastoral Approach* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2000), 45, discusses the problem of “double-binds” like the one Malinda faced in the incommensurable expectations from her congregation.

For instance a death in the church matriarch's extended family only came to Malinda's attention four days after the funeral. Another family member told her, "You know, the family's really upset that you didn't go visit them." Malinda replied, "For what?" She felt stunned to learn: "They had been mad at me for a week-and-a-half for something that I had no idea that I was supposed to do." The next day she spent five hours with the family. From being pulled up short, Malinda recovered and began a process of honing the skills of perception and attention she needed for the work of ministry.<sup>14</sup> In cultivating her practice of ministry, Malinda learned both from immersion in everyday tasks and skills and also through "learning things by messing up."

### The "Rerun Sermon Series"

About nine months into her call, Malinda realized just how much dissonance she was feeling between the demands of the practice of ministry and the amount and kind of knowledge and know-how she needed to do the work well. "It's hard enough to try to figure how to do a budget and the day-to-day tasks." But Malinda also wanted more knowledge and know-how for pastoral counseling. She felt inspired to offer a "Sermon Favorites Series" in the summer to make time for additional reading and learning about ministry basics and also for visiting everyone in the congregation.

*Seeing a Situation*

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<sup>14</sup> Deborah Kerdeman, "Self-Understanding as a Focus of Teaching and Learning" in *Education and Practice: Upholding the Integrity of Teaching and Learning*, eds. Joseph Dunne and Pádraig Hogan (London: Blackwell, 2004), 144-58. Kerdeman observes that being "pulled up short" is a "deep recognition [which] confronts the fundamental limits of what human beings know and can do," (154). In "The Unfolding Pastoral Imagination" we contrast the different responses to being pulled up short in the experience of a new minister versus a much more seasoned pastor. Feeling unsure about how to respond to a parishioner's critique and apparent anger is expected for new pastors and appropriate responses can only be learned over time within the practice itself.



Initially Malinda thought a month would be enough time to step away from weekly sermon preparation and allow time for more reading and visiting, as well as greater attention to her sermon delivery. The choir director liked the idea and encouraged her to extend the series for the summer. That was more time than she imagined, but Malinda took the idea to the Church Council. They approved it enthusiastically.

In response to her sense of being overwhelmed by what she did not know, Malinda took responsibility for her learning and took a risk in trying something novel in the congregation and for herself. At the same time, Malinda's perceptive capacity to see the "more" of the situation was still developing, which contributed to her missing some of the situation and not being able yet to imagine the full range of consequences of choosing to spend the summer this way. Her hope was to bring together knowledge and know-how to make greater use of the knowledge in pastoral care and preaching. In other words, Malinda saw what she needed and improvised a plan. She sought approval and found welcome for the idea.

As the summer went along, Malinda noticed two seemingly unrelated things. First, she was surprised how attendance remained high: the plan seemed to be working. However, she also noticed the absence of one prominent and well-connected leader, the church matriarch's adult daughter. Malinda learned that Maureen was coming to Sunday school and then departing before worship. Malinda knew "something was up."

Maureen was also in training as a lay pastor and involved with the regional governing body. One day mid-summer, Malinda decided to find out what was up so she spoke to Maureen to say she had been missing her. Maureen told her she had been visiting other churches as part of her regional committee work. A few weeks later at a regional meeting, Malinda asked how the church visiting was going. Maureen replied, "Well, I've just been visiting other churches while you've been doing your sermon rerun series." When she said this Malinda noticed

that Maureen's face and body communicated a great deal of anger. Malinda's initial response was, "Oh, okay," because she felt uncertain how to respond.<sup>15</sup> At that very moment the meeting reconvened, giving Malinda longer to think about her next response.

Between these two meetings, Malinda noticed other things were stirred up in the Church Council. Maureen's husband Duke, and her mother Janice, the church matriarch, were members of the Council. As the first year anniversary of Malinda's call to the church approached, she wanted some congregational feedback, and suggested to the Church Council they do an evaluation. Before taking her first call to ministry, Malinda noted, "It's funny how you might not necessarily have a sense of how you're doing unless you get feedback. You might preach this great sermon, but if nobody ever tells you what they think, then you don't really know. It's funny how dependent our jobs are on other people telling us how we're doing." Again Malinda's instincts were right on target. She knew she needed evaluation in order to improve, but her inability to perceive the "more" in the congregation was not developed enough to avoid this situation going in directions she did not welcome.<sup>16</sup>

Malinda only imagined a few open-ended questions for the evaluation, allowing members to offer their thoughts. However, Duke was in charge of evaluations, and he created a detailed questionnaire with more than 45 Likert-scale questions and space for additional

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<sup>15</sup> Learning to make use of skills and knowledge requires an ability and willingness to be "pulled up short," emphasizing "not proficiency and power, but proclivity for self-questioning and doubt." Moments like this one in Malinda's experience put her in a place of learning from uncertainty. See Kerdeman, "Self-Understanding as a Focus of Teaching and Learning," 144.

<sup>16</sup> See Scott Cormode, "Cultivated Instincts," [http://leadership.fuller.edu/Leadership/Classes/CF565/Wk01-03/Cultivated\\_Instincts.aspx](http://leadership.fuller.edu/Leadership/Classes/CF565/Wk01-03/Cultivated_Instincts.aspx) (accessed June 25, 2013). See also Scott Cormode, "Constructing Faithful Action: Inculcating a Method for Reflective Ministry," *Journal of Religious Leadership* vol. 3, No. 2 (2003): 221-276. He argues for a process of theological education that cultivates "instincts for ministry" and nurtures in new ministers an "ability to sense where and when to take the next step," 65.

comments. The first item was “preaches a weekly sermon.” Another item was “integrally involved in planning Vacation Bible School,” an expectation which surprised Malinda. When she saw the evaluation in an email the next week, Malinda recognized aspects of the pastor’s job that had been topics of rumors. Still other items were pasted in from a committee member’s “mechanical engineer evaluation.” Despite initially hearing church members say, “No, the pastor does whatever they want,” there was more to the story. Only much later did Malinda come to see how the evaluation reflected the original advertisement for her job.

Improvising a response and taking a risk with preaching as part of the pastoral life led Malinda to a new situation with more overwhelming and even greater disjuncture between knowledge and practice, and with higher stakes for the outcome of her choices and action. As the situation emerged, a combination of factors slowly took shape in Malinda’s perception. There was “more” to the situation than the individual stories. Malinda saw the feelings of her parishioners—on their faces and in their absence. She perceived the overly long evaluation form, and the emphasis on particular questions, as attempts to tell her more. And there was more at stake in the situation than her own learning. She began to make connections and “to read between the lines and see what people are really saying.”

### *Recognizing Theological and Spiritual Stakes*

In the space that opened up for Malinda to “read between the lines” she was cultivating her sense of perception about what was at stake theologically and spiritually in the situation. Thinking back over the year, Malinda could also see the theological and spiritual importance of different aspects of the situation for herself and the congregation. During the first year of ministry, Malinda was accumulating a storehouse of four kinds of knowledge: about herself, the church context, relationships of power, and ritual practices of ministry. Each of these, and their combined depth of knowing,

opened up the kind of pastoral imagination that ministry as spiritual practice requires.

Malinda could see that she needed more and different knowledge, and she needed to put it into use in relational and embodied ways she had only imagined in seminary, but had not yet tried in pastoral practice.<sup>17</sup> First of all, Malinda's self-knowledge expanded in that year, moving her to the edges of her pastoral skills and knowledge, helping her learn through "messing up," and giving her many opportunities to respond when she found herself surprised. Through asking for and receiving feedback at various points in her first year, Malinda expanded her capacity to see the "more," and she demonstrated a kind of humility needed for seeing with "eyes of faith."<sup>18</sup> As Malinda learned to see the "more" in each of these ways, her budding pastoral imagination was shaping her ministry as spiritual practice.

Second, in the church context, Malinda identified many theological and spiritual aspects of the situation both leading to and unfolding at the point of her conflict with the Council. The lack of a pastoral job description, the history of the congregation, and its tenuousness of trust for their pastors, as well as a lack of shared

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<sup>17</sup> Previously we have argued for understanding ministry as a kind of skilled knowing that is embodied and relational: "both muscular and neurological, but not conscious." Both *phronesis* and *habitus* offer conceptual frameworks for articulating the kind of situated knowing required for pastors to become adept at their work, such that their "use of knowledge about being a pastor moves to the background and appears integrated and even natural." See "Holy cow! This stuff is real! From Imagining Ministry to Pastoral Imagination," 326-27.

<sup>18</sup> See Craig Dykstra, "Pastoral and Ecclesial Imagination," in *For Life Abundant: Practical Theology, Theological Education and Christian Ministry*, eds. Dorothy C. Bass and Craig Dykstra (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 59. Dykstra says, "Through eyes of faith, pastors come to see the abundance that is before them and that surrounds them already. Through eyes of faith, they can see what gifts they have been given in the people who, however flawed, are the members of their congregations. Likewise, through eyes of faith, the members of congregations come to see the abundance that is before them and surrounding them, too. And, through those eyes, they can recognize what gifts they have been given in the people who, however flawed, have become their pastors."

partnership in ministry were all at stake in the situation. The relational connections and unfolding stories of Janice, Maureen, and Duke also seemed to be shaped by “more” than was immediately evident, things that would take time to become clear. She misperceived the message “the pastor does whatever they want” as the end rather than the beginning of a congregational story and expectation. Malinda also drew on a larger pool of wisdom from her tradition to understand her situation: “So the evaluation form comes up and meanwhile, in the back of my mind, I’m thinking maybe this is why pastors only have Council members evaluate them one-on-one, or there’s normally a personnel or staff team. Maybe this is why you don’t have congregational feedback.” Malinda began to perceive how trust between pastor and congregation as well as faithfulness to calling and tradition were important aspects of the situation.

Third, the central family who led the Council shaped dynamics of power in the congregation. Long-term underlying layers of history between the congregation and its pastors played a key role as well. Church members had come to expect little in the way of longevity, believing Malinda, like the others before her, “would go off and get a big church.” At the same time, they expected a great deal from the pastors regarding the daily and weekly work of the church. For example, when the women of the church planned a special event they insisted on finding a time when Malinda could attend. As they planned, Malinda realized she had a scheduling conflict with an out-of-town wedding. She told the women, “I don’t have to be there. You all can have it without me.” She was trying to avoid the pastor-centered assumption that she had to attend every event. They replied, “No, no. We don’t want any of that. We can just do it again next year.” Then one woman commented, “But you might not be here next time.” Malinda looked at the woman and asked, “Well, what makes you think I won’t be here next time?” And she said, “Because the last time it took us eleven years to get around to thinking about it again, and you won’t be here in eleven years.” Malinda described a sense

within the comments: “It’s a mentality of we’re not good enough for somebody to stay.”

Malinda’s questions about the history of the congregation revealed that previous pastors had experienced “burn out,” something she was feeling also, because she “was doing everything for them.” Spiritually and theologically this accumulated history of dependency and tenuous connections with previous pastors raised questions for Malinda about the faith community’s need for forgiveness and reconciliation, and how a sense of belonging and partnership might be cultivated.

Fourth, through the first year Malinda was immersed in the everyday ritual practices of preaching, giving care, teaching and training the Council and congregation, leading in worship, administrative tasks, and participating in communal life. She saw gaps in her pastoral knowledge and know-how.<sup>19</sup> For example it took time to recognize how to “discern what is important and unimportant” and how to “develop some good boundaries with my congregation” regarding responses with e-mails and phone calls. Malinda was learning in that first year to “live in the moments” where she found herself. Setting a schedule is “a fine line to walk,” says Malinda, “because if I’m too lax, then I end up writing sermons on my day off.” She began to aim for a schedule with “flexible room” in it. She recognized how Sunday mornings at the back of the church brought people shaking her hand,

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<sup>19</sup> Describing Malinda’s dilemma exactly, Bonnie Miller-McLemore says to theological educators: “Those who come into the classroom must leave better prepared to do something, whether that be to listen, worship, preach, lead, form, teach, oversee, convert, transform, or pursue justice. They need theological know-how. They need more than just the capacity to ‘*think*’ theologically’ (the focus of plenty of books on reflective practice and the heart of many treatises on practical theology), but also the capacity to ‘*practice*’ theology by putting theology into action through one’s body on the ground.” See “Practical Theology and Pedagogy: Embodying Theological Know-How” in *For Life Abundant: Practical Theology, Theological Education and Christian Ministry*, eds. Dorothy C. Bass and Craig Dykstra (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 173.

telling her what was going on in their lives, and setting her week's schedule.

Her perception of the situation was not merely an accumulation of complex knowledge about theological and spiritual stakes of the situation. Her pastoral imagination was also an increasing ability to see in and through all that she knew, to what mattered most for responding to the situation at hand. The biggest test of this kind of situated, embodied, and accumulated knowledge came at the end of Malinda's first year in the conflict over her job-evaluation. The situation forced her to make multiple responses to the Council and congregation.

### *Knowing How to Respond*

One week in particular required Malinda to act quickly and make multiple responses in the moment. It began with an email on a Saturday from Duke asking if she would approve the evaluation form so he could hand it out at church the next day. She had the presence of mind to respond immediately by suggesting it would be a better process to have it approved by the Council. By the next morning, having slept on it, she gave Duke a firm "no." She had sent the evaluation to some friends to check it out with them, and heard back the response, "Not even Jesus himself could live up to some of these things!" It felt particularly wrong to Malinda to approve such a detailed evaluation when she had no job description. Pondering her plight, she wondered if this kind of situation shows why it is important to have a personnel team for the pastor!

Early the next week, in preparation for the Council meeting, Duke sent out the evaluation to the Council, and also to other family members and church members (an Elder later told Malinda). When she arrived at the Council meeting, half the Council was out sick. Only Duke, his mother-in-law Janice, and the clerk were present. She recalls feeling like "it was just them and me." Yet just here, her theological bedrock—a belief in God's presence in the midst of whatever is going on—

supported her desire to seek a way through the situation. She resigned herself to the circumstances, thinking they would just go ahead with the evaluation questionnaire. She did, after all, believe that feedback was important for ministry! She recalls saying to herself, “I asked for it. It’s my own fault. I got myself into this. I’ll just suck it up this year and if they’re horrible, they’re horrible.” She expressed concern about not having a job description and having to live up to expectations she knew nothing about, which Duke “promised to mention as he handed them out.”

In the midst of the meeting, and to Malinda’s surprise, Duke offered to give feedback on the spot. Malinda responded, “I hope you feel like you can come to me and give me feedback at any time. Yes, I would love some feedback.” He then told her the “Rerun Sermon Series” was a failure, and some people were looking at other churches. Malinda had a wide range of positive comments in her recent memory resulting from visits to members’ homes (part of the point of the series). She drew upon the strength of these good conversations to remind the Council they approved “Sermon Favorites Series.” She began to realize when members of Duke’s family “come to Council and say things like, ‘people are leaving, everyone’s upset,’ it means one person in their family.” In this case, the one important member of the family was Duke’s wife, Maureen. Malinda felt this insight came slowly, but was crucial for her ability to hear feedback and respond. The next day, the Council clerk called her to check up on her, having felt badly about the tenor of the meeting.

They agreed on Rally Day a few weeks hence to hand out the survey. However, Duke was on the steps of the church the very next Sunday handing the evaluation out to everyone after the service. All surveys were to be returned to him, so he could write a summary report for the Council. Malinda worried the reports could be misunderstood by Council. Yet she felt strangely calm knowing this clash had given her the opportunity to understand some of the key dynamics in the



congregation. She responded to them in such a way to both establish her own authority and keep in relationship with those—Duke’s family included—whom she felt in conflict with through these weeks. Exactly here, in the first major crisis of her ministry, Malinda stayed relationally connected: to God, to her critics, to the wider congregation, and to friends and supporters beyond the local scene. These connections, and her humble spirit of learning with and from her practice in ministry, opened her to what one might call a careful vulnerability offered with hope of deepened relationship over time, and the possibility of shared ministry.

*Responding to the Community as Participation in God*

As Malinda reflected about the whole summer and the sermon series, she asked herself, “Did I discern this wrong?” And yet she says, “Throughout the process I had some confirmation every single week that the sermon I was preaching that week was the exact right sermon. . . I was worried that I wouldn’t be able to get into the sermon because it would be old, but I felt like every week I could climb back in and really mean what I was saying, and it was a great experience. I think I grew as a preacher in learning how I deliver sermons, and I got to read. I got to visit more. I had some great things come out of visitations for people that weren’t really involved in church and now feel like they have a connection. Lots of good things came out of it.” Yet, following a week of the unfolding drama around the evaluations, Malinda was saying to herself, “Wow, maybe I really did screw this up. Maybe I really did discern this wrong.”

During the late weeks of the summer, Malinda made good use of her peer connections in a regional support group for new pastors, and with other friends, to vent some of her experience and hear the confirmation, “No, you’re not crazy. It wasn’t you.” This collegial feedback loop allowed Malinda to come to the Council meeting without bringing the self-doubt and anxiety of the situation. Instead she says, “I got to say what’s deeply, truly hidden way down in my heart.” What she said to the

council that night—after they offered their feedback to her—was this: “Seminary does not train you to be a pastor; it trains you how to think theologically. You have to tell me how to be your pastor. I don’t know that. You have to tell me what you need from me as your pastor.” Saying this directly to them was “a great moment.” It also allowed the Council members to “let their guard down...and be vulnerable.”

Malinda’s asking of the Council directly for help in becoming their pastor led to more honest feedback from them as well. One said, “The sermon series isn’t working, [because] for most of the members of the church, the sermon is the highlight of their week.” In the moment Malinda explained away the comment to herself as a social desire “to be with friends and family and have fellowship.” She also imagined it was “some other minister or somebody else inspiring them.” But after going home and thinking about it, she was “willing to let in the incredible compliment” and the grace they were offering: the sermon is the highlight of the week for some. Malinda says it taught her “to look for the good in things and to read between the lines to see what people are really saying.”

In late childhood, Malinda experienced laying down her life for God so that it was not hers alone. Her sense of participation in God’s love, reconciliation, and purpose came powerfully in that moment when she was worshipping alone at the lake and felt God’s call to ministry and promise of presence. Now that the reality of that vocational call was emerging in practice, Malinda’s sense of belonging and participation in God was also expanding. She could see herself with increasing honesty and humility, and could accept the grace, the “compliments” about her preaching, which were offered to her. She was willing to do her own processing with other pastors and mentors who could hear her worries, and offer enough assurance to help her take greater risk in being vulnerable with her Council and congregation.

In her appropriate vulnerability, naming the community’s work of helping her learn to be their pastor,

Malinda also invited greater vulnerability from the Council. Rather than extending a crisis, pastor and people were able for one “great moment” to see and hear each other with more partnership and less dependency. She was strengthening the congregation’s leaders by inviting them into a greater sense of belonging, which eventually led to shifting roles on the Council where gifts and skills matched more adequately with the jobs each person was doing. And it opened the way for greater shared responsibility for worship, pastoral care, and the overall life and work of the community of faith.

Malinda could see the spiritual and theological possibilities of her situation rather than just the deficit of church leaders who were overly critical of her performance. She had learned through small failures and “messaging up” during her first year, which helped prepare her to face the bigger crisis. In the months that followed this incident, she began to speak increasingly about the need to “envision the work and relationship with the pastor” rather than focus on “job performance.” This eventually helped the Council adopt a more meaningful description of her work and embrace their work of teaching Malinda to be their pastor.

## Conclusions

If Malinda had seen and acted only from of the deficit of the church leaders’ critique, she might have embodied a number of problematic responses. First, she could have given into her anger, felt unjustly accused, or retaliated. Had she done this, the crisis would have escalated and perhaps unraveled the possibility of good ministry in this congregation. Second, she could have taken in the criticism, allowing it to deflate her confidence and damage her self-image. Had she done this, she might have withdrawn from engagement, an equally problematic response in relation to the hope for her ongoing faithful ministry in their midst. Instead, Malinda did not overreact in either direction—she describes developing a “hard but permeable shell” for dealing with these sorts of challenges. Her even keel allows her to recognize the

implicit expectations rooted in the history of the congregation: a double-binding message that pastors leave *and* pastors do all the work of the church. By staying connected to the members and the processes of the church, she does not fall into the trap of reproducing the same story, or give in to negative dynamics threatening to undermine her ministry leadership.

Instead, Malinda effectively engages in ministry with her congregation with honesty and humility. In the spaces where Malinda took responsibility and risk for her own learning, felt overwhelmed by her situation, and experienced a disjuncture between knowledge and practice, she increasingly found ways to stay connected with parishioners, to learn from her missteps and times when she was pulled up short, and to improvise her leadership. She drew upon her deep understanding of God's presence in her life in order to lead her congregation toward more vulnerable engagement and participation in the communal life and practices of God.

Malinda grew in her capacity to recognize the "more" of the situations in her first year of ministry, and this growth made all the difference. Ministry as spiritual practice, in Malinda's case, includes attending to and learning from: the character of her own life (humility), her new context (faithful participation), the dynamics of power (belonging and partnership), and the ritual practices of ministry (significance of practice over time). Malinda's deepened knowledge of these aspects of ministry expands her capacity for pastoral imagination and shows the character of ministry as a spiritual practice. Malinda says, "It is interesting to reflect back on how God is working." Indeed, in a crucial moment at the end of her first year of ministry, she was able to open herself in vulnerability to the congregation's leadership, allowing God to turn a moment of impasse into a moment of grace.