

Do new biographies need new curricula?
CPCE, Oslo,
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The topic which I have been given invites consideration of student profiles in line with student learning. To what extent, therefore, should places of theological training be either permitted, or indeed willing, to recognise the prior experience of students entering into ministerial formation? I should emphasise that the model that I work with differs markedly from that which is typically deployed in many churches of the CPCE, in that both the academic and more professional components of training are delivered concurrently and not sequentially, however it would be my strong conviction that this more blended approach facilitates a much richer student experience of personal and ministerial formation. I propose to explore the specific question under four sub-headings: ‘Vocation in the gospels’; ‘Prior learning and university policy’; ‘Lived experience and integration of learning’; and finally, some ‘Preliminary recommendations’.

1. Vocation in the gospels

Any vocation into a specialised discipline involves the life of the individual ‘before’ and ‘after’ the moment or experience of calling, and a vocation to pastoral ministry is no different. Moreover, by dint of what it means to be human according to the doctrine of *imago Dei*, a theology of personhood insists that these twin aspects of life ‘before’ and life ‘after’ cannot become disconnected. Rather, they together constitute the unique charism and ongoing discipleship of the one who then moves towards the domain of Christian ministry, and problems inevitably occur when those essential aspects of personhood become either disintegrated or imbalanced in some way. In this regard, for example, we might think of Jesus calling his first disciples. Those whom he summons are fishermen – fishing was their skill, it was their world, it was so much of their lived experience – and it is striking that Jesus invites them to move forward precisely through an appeal to that familiar domain. As recorded in Matthew, his first words to them are, ‘Come, follow me, and I will make you *fish* for people’,¹ and later of course there would be further crucial episodes when they would re-encounter that known world of the Sea of Galilee and the task of fishing, but according to an entirely new paradigm of Jesus’ teaching and miracles. For those first disciples, in other words, their skillset and experience – their calling ‘before’ – would continue in many ways to live with them even as they themselves transitioned into following – their calling ‘after’ – and this knowledge would be put to a whole new purpose within the establishment of God’s kingdom. So, do new biographies need new curricula? The emphasis of the gospel would appear to endorse awareness of how important it is for those curricula to recognise the unique giftedness of all student adherents and the latent potential which this in itself might hold.

2. Prior learning and university policy

I have the privilege of serving as Principal of the Church of Ireland Theological Institute, and we work in an historic partnership with Trinity College, Dublin, which goes all the

¹ Matthew 4:19.

way back to the charter of the university under Elizabeth 1 in 1592.² In line with many other third level institutions, TCD has in recent years become more aware of need to allow for ‘Recognition of Prior Learning’,³ and this can be observed especially in relation to course admissions. I can think of one of our students, now happily enrolled on the Master’s in Theology, whose sole qualification, aside from having completed the one-year Foundation Certificate, was as a stonemason, and whose application to come into theological training was thus heavily predicated on an appeal to his own earlier biography, his background in manual labour, and his wider life experience. Do new biographies need new curricula? A thoroughgoing evaluation of prior learning at the point of evaluating eligibility to undertake training can undoubtedly facilitate a better sense of overall suitability.

3. Lived experience and integration of learning

If I had to document the full range of backgrounds from which our students have emerged into training, I would have you here for a very long time! Suffice to say, a snapshot must include those who have gone into ordained ministry from careers in finance, media, arts, sports, management, the military, civil service, human resources, medicine, undertaking, music, creative writing, and being a homemaker. Many are in what might be described as non-linear vocational paths; whereas some are young and only embarking on the fulness of their life’s journey, others are second- or third-career candidates.⁴ There are those who will deploy as full-time stipendiary and others who will remain in their careers as part-time or locally ordained ministers. The educational trajectories are diverse, and naturally in each individual case the co-ordinates of life are constantly changing. How then do such multiple biographies feature within the training process, and does their reality invite re-appraisal of the actual programme as prescribed by the curriculum?

In *After Virtue* Alister McIntyre refers to what he describes as ‘communities of practice’, with ‘a practice’ being defined as ‘a coherent, complex, and socially established cooperative human activity’.⁵ McIntyre’s thinking has been developed by David Heywood who posits that for any process of preparation towards pastoral ministry to be effective there must be an alignment of three such communities of practice, namely

- 1) that which centres on the ‘scholastic’ and the need for study;
- 2) that which attends to the ongoing development and deepening of personal ‘discipleship’;
- 3) that which draws essentially from ‘prior experience’.⁶

It is precisely through a fruitful interplay of these three spheres of influence that students will acquire what Heywood refers to as ‘practical wisdom’ and ‘pastoral imagination’. In turn, this suggests that any training process which aspires to the full potential of its curriculum (and this includes the attainment of good grades) must be intentional about exposing students to rigorous theological reflection and regular opportunities for

² The University of Dublin’s original charter aimed at ‘providing Anglican clergy on the island of Ireland’.

³ See [Recognition-Prior-Learning-Policy.pdf](#)

⁴ These descriptors can be understood either in terms of changing professional career paths or indeed chronologically. There is a broad age-range for both the MTh and the lower-level Ordained Local Ministry pathway.

⁵ McIntyre, A., *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theology*, Notre Dame: University Press, 1987.

⁶ Heywood, D., *Reimagining Ministerial Formation*, London: SCM, 2021.

benchmarking ideas against biographical background. Precisely thus can integration of learning be maximised. In CITI, for example, I can think of numerous, academically weaker students who, when it came to the capstone task of writing a Masters dissertation, were able to invoke some of their own prior knowledge, whether that was in gardening, in chemistry, in film production, or in their own condition of neuro-diversity, and apply these creatively to the betterment of their results. Equally, in that statistics suggest students retain as little as 10% of what they hear through lectures in a classroom, only 20% of what they discover in conversation with colleagues, and, remarkably, as much as 70% of that which is reinforced to them on the basis of praxis, a vital step towards addressing such a deficit within ministerial formation again has to be theological reflection on real lived experience.⁷ Awareness of student biographies can thus serve to deepen student flourishing and equip those in training, not as intellectual specialists *per se*, but more importantly as well-rounded and well-grounded ministry practitioners.

In support of this assertion, the London Institute for Contemporary Christianity highlights the need for what it describes as ‘formation for enabling ministry’.⁸ The final arbiter of effectiveness for any process of ministerial training has to be the pastoral and missional competency of its participants to lead a community of faith. According to the LICC’s research, the best gauge of assessing this is the extent to which those who exercise leadership can equip church members to live out their discipleship, not solely within the life of the church, but more especially where God has placed them in their homes and in their workplaces. The metric which the Institute proposes here makes for a fascinating point of reference for how ministerial training programmes work with their students, and it again points to the importance of personal biography. This ‘formation for enabling ministry’ can be realised through a commitment to six subsidiary principles:

- ‘modelling godly character’;
- ‘making good work’;
- ‘ministering grace and love’;
- ‘moulding culture’;
- ‘being a mouthpiece for truth and justice’;
- ‘acting as a messenger of the gospel’.

Since these metrics are the very means whereby those who have been trained are expected to develop others, the training process itself can only be enhanced by enabling those within it to bear witness to how they have previously known what it means to inhabit such virtues themselves. Hence, it goes without saying that effective preparation for pastoral duty must invoke their lived experience prior to vocation.

4. Preliminary recommendations

Do new biographies need new curricula? The tentative answer of this paper is best coined as both ‘Yes’ and ‘No’. In support of a deeper commitment to respecting the lived experience which students bring from their ‘before vocation’ lives, it seems clear that

- 1) the gospel points in this direction;
- 2) it is likely to become increasingly important at the point of course admission;
- 3) the diversity of who the students are brings its own enrichment;

⁷ See [Ebbinghaus Forgetting Curve \(Definition + Examples\) - Practical Psychology](#)

⁸ See [Formation for Enabling Ministry: A Community of Practice | LICC](#)

- 4) there must be heightened awareness of how theological reflection within overlapping communities of practice can deepen practical and pastoral wisdom;
- 5) there may be a case for thinking more creatively about intentional integration of curricular subjects.⁹

In the final analysis, however, given that there must also be teaching essential doctrine and the instilling of knowledge, I would contend that realising all of this ought to be possible within existing curricula, especially if alongside such core emphases there might be more flexible approaches to formational programmes and a willingness to embrace more diversified assignments. Even if much of the curricula themselves might remain unchanged, at the very least the new biographies warrant re-appraisal of teaching methods, with a particular commitment to integration, and, moreover, experience would suggest this in turn can enhance recruitment.

⁹ Some of the methods used within CITI would include: inviting students to reflect on three core questions in relation to any taught materials – ‘What do I learn here about God?’ ‘What do I learn here about myself?’ ‘What do I learn here about the nature of ministry?’; setting assignments which bring together theory and practice; an annual integrated seminar; assessment via ministry portfolio; requiring dissertations to be intentionally integrated across three strands of learning – rigorous biblical exegesis, robust theological sources, and practical outworking into mission and ministry.