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Are you listening? The relevance of what pastoral/ denominational leaders and theological educators are saying about preparing leaders for ministry

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ABSTRACT

What might pastoral leaders in flourishing congregations have to say to theological educators in preparing leaders for the church and visa-versa? Drawing on interviews and focus groups with over one hundred pastoral/denominational leaders across Canada, four key themes emerged: (1) Equipping the Saints; (2) Practical Discipleship Training; (3) Spiritual Formation of seminary students; and (4) Missional and Organizational Training. The article contains several ways that pastoral leaders and theological educators might move forward with these findings.

Introduction

What do Canadian pastoral and denominational leaders in self-identified flourishing congregations[1] have to say to educators in theological schools or seminaries about preparing leaders for vocational ministry and visa-versa? The changing landscape of congregations, and society as a whole, has required church leaders to speak out about the formational preparedness and ministry effectiveness of theological school graduates. It is in the best interests of theological educators to listen well to frontline church leaders by considering and possibly making adjustments to their educational mission and curriculum in order to fulfil its primary purpose: to prepare religious professionals for ministry (Foster et al. 2006; Wheeler, Miller, and Aleshire 2007).

A review of the history of theological curriculum development indicates a strong bent towards intellectual and cognitive growth instead of personal and spiritual formation (Farley 1983; Niebuhr, Williams, and Gustafson 1957). As a result, studies show that graduates of theological schools were not fully equipped with the ministry knowledge, skills, and values needed for sustained and flourishing ministry (Paver 2006; Smith 2009; Wang 2010). Furthermore, pastoral leaders and congregations who call these graduates into local parishes identify and often criticise the lack of professional training and spiritual formation of these graduates from theological schools. One of the reasons for this criticism is because local congregational cultures and society in general are changing at an ever-rapid rate and

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theological schools have been unable to keep pace. On the surface, the complexities of knowledge and practices from the 'field' have had little or no effect on the construction of the theological curriculum, on faculty pedagogy, or on the spiritual formation of theological students.

As a way to move forward, this article attempts to spark conversation on two fronts: (1) Intergroup-Conversation between theological educators and pastoral and denominational leaders; and (2) Intragroup-Conversation amongst each individual group of pastoral/denominational leaders and theological educators. First, this article gives voice to Canadian pastoral and denominational leaders who highlight ministry practices that could or should influence the structure and content of the theological curriculum; such as may help pastoral leaders in training, and ultimately congregations to flourish. These explicitly broad and ecumenical voices, and often times nuanced voices, will be relevant to theological educators because they help bridge the gap between what is happening in actual ministry practices and the possible ways to reshape theological curricula. This gap issue between professional practice and the education and formation of religious professionals is not just a concern in theological education, but also requires the attention of other professional disciplines as well (Brunk 1995; Carr 1996; Cope, Cuthertson, and Stoddart 2000; Ryan 1988). But there are also signs in the theological curriculum literature that the gaps between professional practices and theological curricula seem to be lessening, and that theological educators are finding creative ways to shape the curriculum in order to be relevant to pastoral and denominational leaders. Second, the significance of this article for an intragroup conversation is to offer an awareness of the curricular and pastoral issues among each individual group, such as has the potential to foster an ecumenical breadth within each group and to provoke thoughtful intergroup dialogue between pastoral/denominational leaders and theological educators.

Brief review of the literature

The perceived gaps of understanding between the 'field' and theological schools are highlighted in the theological literature and also in other professional disciplines. Powers (2011, 305) pointed out three issues with the theological curriculum: (1) A significant portion of learning takes place in the classroom taught by the theological faculty; (2) Praxis learning is assigned to field education or courses focusing on practical theology; and (3) Personal, spiritual, and vocation formation experiences are relatively new to the curriculum. Theological schools do well with issue number one, but not with delivering on issues two and three. Powers (2011, 307) concluded,

> If the process outside does not complement what is taught in the classroom, students experience a disconnect. They may learn the materials and pass the course but sometimes don't have a clue about the relevance of what they have been taught to life and ministry in various contexts.

A related issue around curriculum construction is how the relationship between theory and practice is conceived and approached.[2] Many classical theological curriculums presume a one-way relationship between theory and practice in which theory that is taught in the classroom always serves as the point of departure; that theory is something from 'outside' to be applied, and the role of practice is to receive it (Ball and Harrison 2012; Banks 1999; Kelsey 1993; Lamb 1982). A related gap concerns the rise of academic

theology, especially in the context of the university, such that this has separated church leadership from the academic rigour of theological studies. Cannell (2006, 60) stated poignantly that, 'As the disciplines of academic theology were consolidated, theological specialists trained in the academy were increasingly ill equipped to relate theology to the pressing concerns of congregations and society' (also see Cobb 1996, 197). As a result, there was a weakening connection between belief and practice, piety and reason, and knowledge and virtue (Cannell 2006, 61). Furthermore, the problem of the disjunction between theory taught in the classroom and professional practice is a matter of concern in a number of professions in which practice and performance are of paramount importance such as nursing, radiotherapy, physical therapy, medicine, occupational therapy, social work, education, architecture, urban planning, and psychotherapy (Baird 1992; Baird 1996; Dewey 1938; Fenstermacher and Richardson 1993; Higgs and Titchen 1995; Hollis 1991; Hooper 1997; Klein and Bloom 1995; Louis 1998; Mullen 1995; Schon 1987; Shulman 1987; Zeichner 1994). Like theological education, these professional disciplines are figuring out the relationship between professional practice and the formal curriculum.

What this brief literature review has demonstrated is the tension between the practitioner knowledge and practice and the academic knowledge taught in the classroom; and that, ultimately, this tension affects the construction of the theological curriculum. If this is the case, what pastoral and denominational leaders say about the relevance of the theological curriculum and how it might be shaped is important for the preparation of theological students who will eventually move into professional ministry and who desire those ministries to flourish.

Method

What do Canadian pastoral and denominational leaders have to say to theological educators about the formation of future pastoral leaders, especially around the issue of flourishing? This research question is tied to a broader three phase research project that explored the variables that account for flourishing within Catholic, mainline Protestant, and conservative Protestant churches in Canada. In phase one of the research project, an Appreciative Inquiry (AI) theoretical framework was used to develop interview and focus group questions and guide data collection. AI is premised on a theoretical shift from focusing on what is wrong toward, instead, what is right with people (Cooperrider, Whitney, and Stavros 2008; Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi 2000) – a positive psychology and strength-based lens on developing positive outlooks and habits in individuals and studying the conditions that enable individuals and communities to thrive (Carr 2004; Keyes, Frederickson, and Park 2012; Luthans and Youssef 2007; Seligman 2011). Embedded within an AI framework (Cooperrider, Whitney, and Stavros 2008; Watkins, Mohr, and Kelly 2011), we built on grounded theory (Charmaz 2004; Strauss and Corbin 1998) and centred our analysis on themes emerging from participants from the semi-structured interviews and focus groups, with cognisance of the extant literature.

Data collection took place between April and October 2016 in five Canadian regions: Vancouver, Calgary, Winnipeg, Toronto, and Halifax. Our sampling strategy involved approaching church and denominational leaders across Canada, asking them to refer us to congregations they would say are flourishing. We reached out to nearly 400 individuals

in this process. We then relied upon snowball sampling from those who agreed to partici-pate, who put us in contact with other flourishing congregations/parishes. As a result, we conducted nine focus groups with sixty-six individuals and we interviewed 109 pastoral and denominational leaders. Many participated in both a focus group and interview. Inter-viewees included twenty Catholic, thirty-six mainline Protestant, and forty-six conservative Protestant pastoral leaders. We also interviewed two leaders in parachurch organisations, who regularly worked with leaders of flourishing congregations; plus five academics whose research mainly focused on Christian congregations.

Each semi-structured interview took about one hour to conduct and the focus groups were about an hour and a half. At the beginning of the interview or focus group, a consent form was distributed and signed by all participants stating the purpose of the study and how the data were to be used for institutional and research purposes. Furthermore, the consent form indicated that the research project received approval from the university's Research Ethics Board. The interviews were audio recorded with the written and verbal consent of the participants. The interview guide contained ten questions. In conjunction with these questions, we used probes to encourage the participants to share further details, introspections, and experiences (Glesne and Peshkin 1992).

We used an orthographic style of transcription for all interviews and focus groups. As a research team we used the qualitative software package NVivo to jointly organise, thema-tically code, and analyze all the data. Each team member read through the transcripts and identified prevailing codes (i.e., 'nodes' in NVivo) in line with the current literature. We also used grounded theory to code and re-code transcripts based on emerging and candidate themes not currently accounted for in the literature. Throughout this coding process our research team regularly met to discuss and refine these themes. The memo function in NVivo was especially helpful to link our data with the literature, hypothesise about relationships amongst data, and compare cases based on religious tradition or regions in Canada. This collective process culminated in a final phase of 'focused coding' (Charmaz 2004) where we centred our coding on the themes detailed at the outset of the study along with new themes that arose from our interviews and focus groups.

One of the emergent themes centred on theological education. With a good overview and familiarity with the entire data set of all team members, two team members were assigned to explore further this theme in our data. The Word Cloud function in NVivo was used to display the most frequently occurring words used around this theme resulting in three words: seminary, theological education, and training. A text search was then uti-lised producing 103 sources and 1006 references from the data. Each reference was reviewed again by the research members and selective coding was used to generate the codes from the data set. Braun and Clarke (2013, pt.6, chap. 9) stated that selective coding, 'involves identifying a corpus of "instances" of the phenomenon that you're inter-ested in, and then selecting those out. The purpose here is one of "data reduction"'. The following is a sample list of codes that were generated:

- Train leaders not for professional ministry but for missional engagement in the neigh-bourhood and not maintaining the institution of the church
- Understand the context and learn from it; the need for mentors for new seminary grads
- Helping seminary students contextualise ministry
- Strong clergy leadership

- Spiritual Formation of the person in the seminary
- Mentorship during and after seminary
- Practical Discipleship Training
- Equipping the Saints

We eliminated or combined codes that contained only one or two examples or that overlapped considerably with other codes. However, Norton (2009, 120) warned that 'even if one person has said something that can be described as a category, it might be more true to the research analysis to keep it in; this is part of the subjective process and will need justifying'. We then merged and collapsed as many as the codes together as possible, relabelling them as candidate themes.

Findings, discussion, and reflections

After reading through the interview transcripts, one of the observations that stood out was that there is a wide range of life backgrounds and ministry experience, as well as educational journeys, found among the pastoral leaders. As indicated, we interviewed leaders in the Catholic, mainline, and conservative Protestant ecclesial traditions. For instance, there were a number of church leaders who had entered into ministry positions at a young age with relatively little life experience prior to their seminary training. One interviewee gave the following brief synopsis of his entry into pastoral leadership:

> So I'm first generation Christian. My family, my immediate family is not. So I came into church in high school. Got connected at the end of high school but then ended up doing an undergrad in theology. Worked as a pastor in Toronto for two years.

By contrast, others, such as one of our Catholic friends who took a different, more complex path:

> … formations for the priesthood requires going to the seminary which, if you do not have a Bachelor's degree, you'd have to get a Bachelor's degree. You proceed to theology for a Masters in Divinity … My degree was in Mass Communication with the Jesuits in [name of Country] and then, I had a year of pre-theology in [name of State], it is outside of [name of City]. Five years were spent at [name of Seminary]. Then I was ordained …

With this diversity of participants, a number of themes emerged from the one-on-one interviews and focus groups, namely:

(1) Equipping the saints
(2) Practical discipleship training
(3) Spiritual formation of seminary students
(4) Missional and organizational training

Equipping the saints

First, the dominant theme that stood out centred on 'equipping the saints'. Pastoral and denominational leaders spoke of the difficulty to identify and prepare congregants to serve effectively in the many aspects of ministry in the local parish. Many of the pastoral leaders found it hard to categorise lay-leaders and questioned their ability to provide

leadership to a ministry area. One Chinese pastoral leader in Ontario succinctly stated, 'The congregation that I pastor, many of them are workers. Not necessarily like blue-collar workers. But they are not in management or leadership level. They aren't trained. They have been forced in the church environment to be a leader!'

Many of the pastoral leaders who articulated the issue of effectiveness and lay-competency also said they were moving forward and attempting to address this issue. One Protestant pastoral leader expressed himself this way:

> So training the leaders, that's another thing is identifying leaders. So, we're working this year really hard on making sure that we break all of our volunteers down into different categories. We're calling them volunteers and leaders and then we're adding a variant in between called apprentices. So, every volunteer has a volunteer leader who's organizing them. But then every leader has an apprentice that's training.

This particular pastoral leader's response to 'equipping the saints' aligns well with the literature where the focus of the parish suggests there is a need to shift from the ministry of the clergy to the ministry of the laity (Breen 2011; Ogden 2003; Slocum 1990). What gets in the way of this shift from clergy to laity is clericalism. Father James Mallon (2014, pt. 11, chap. 4) stated this in rather strong terms:

> In short, to being missionary disciples[3] – clericalism is ultimately a suppression of the baptismal identity. Priests and nuns become super-Christians who have the superpowers to do what ordinary Christians cannot. This elevation leads to two outcomes: the isolation of the clergy and the immaturity of the baptized.

An Anglican clergy from the Maritimes appeared to concur:

> We have some clericalism issues to be honest because the priests have, in some ways many of our clergy have been trained in a model where they did everything and that was back in the days of the 60s and 70s, when there wasn't a lot of, of you know, there were different demands I guess, on the clergy. But it wasn't a healthy model, we know that, and certainly not biblical in terms of the Book of Acts and what we see in the New Testament in terms of the shared, shared ministry.

What further complicates the 'equipping of the saints' theme are hierarchical ecclesial structures and theology. In spite of theology and hierarchical ecclesial structures, many pastoral leaders hope to release the laity for ministry by experimenting with ways that change the parish culture. An Anglican Priest in British Columbia, said of her parish:

> So, I think what we begin to see is we're engaged in this process, is that people are being released to be able to use the gifts that they have or try things within the culture of the congregation … and our work is around not a program, so seeing it very much as every individual context has to discern for itself the direction that God is leading it. It's not like cookie cutter, pick it up and put it in. So, it's really hard work. At the same time 'cause culture change, right, takes a long time, but we're I think beginning to see some of the fruit of that in some changed ideas and mindsets. There's this energy and engagement by the laity that's beautiful, that hasn't been, [what] our tradition has been.

A Catholic priest in Alberta spoke of his parish:

> Now technically it's the Pastor who oversees it all. But really, there's actually more Lay participation in the Catholic Church than there ever would have been in an Evangelical church. The flourishing congregations are usually the ones that know how to designate and [do it] well. I

guess that's not really a story. But they're a lot of little stories surrounded that. I kind of woke up to that reality … Yeah. All our good churches are the ones that have the priest that know how to designate well.

Many of the responses about theological education by the pastoral and denominational leaders included critiques of their own theological training, which followed a clerical paradigm: the training of clergy as professionals. Farley (1983) argued that the professionalism of theological education has segmented theological curriculum. Instead of seeing the theological curriculum in a holistic and unifying way, theological education has fragmented into various sub-disciplines resulting in training clergy who do not know how to connect with congregational practice and life. The theological curriculum has typically concentrated on clergy leadership and not on the work of the congregation, such as the 'equipping of the saints'. Keifert (2009, 13) pointed out that 'congregations have returned to the consciousness of students of theology', and 'this return of congregations to a conscious theological conversation is related to other developments taking place in theological education'.

Regardless of ecclesial traditions, pastoral leaders found innovative avenues to release the laity for significant ministries. In the practical theological literature this is called the 'second reformation correction', where the gulf between 'clergy' and 'laity' is narrowing as laity are now seen as being more capable of assuming more ministry responsibilities than they had been previously given (Mallon 2014; Shawchuck and Heuser 1993). This literature also frames the release of the laity for the work of ministry as the 'priesthood of all believers' (Helland and Hjalmarson 2011; Ogden 2003; Schwarz 1999). The voices of pastoral and denominational leaders confirm the existing practical theology literature on the relationship between clergy and laity; but our sense is that those we interviewed were also concerned that theological education needs to begin to address the 'how to' question. How do those training for full time ministry equip the saints in a parish context, and how can such training be embedded in the theological curriculum? We would call for explicit courses on leadership and leadership development to be critical components to the curriculum that students preparing for full time ministry are exposed to. Such training would include both a theological- and practitioner-oriented focus to student development that, we believe, will ultimately benefit leader and lay flourishing in congregational life.

Practical discipleship training

The second theme centres on practical discipleship training. Although pastoral and denominational leaders mentioned that discipleship was one of the many traits associated with flourishing congregations, they were also conscious that effective discipleship was not operationalised in the parish. More exactly, practical and lived out discipleship was something that they wished to happen. A Catholic priest in Ontario stated his viewpoint this way:

What I would like it to look like is, that the parishioners have a real sense of their discipleship. That they are disciples. And that in the living out of their lives, whether it's in the context of their family, their work, or their school, they see the way that they live, the way that they engage in a relationship is an expression of their relationship with the person of Jesus. And that they're living that relationship so that they have a sense of their own—that they are

disciples with a call to make Christ present in the world. If everybody in my parish had that understanding and appreciation of who they are of their identity, then I would say that would be a very positive parish.

For many of the pastoral leaders, building a discipleship culture and learning to make disciples was not part of their theological education. As a result, moving from Christian conversion to discipleship was seen as aspirational. One denominational leader in Western Canada aptly expressed his view,

I think our pastors are taught – they're not taught how to be a disciple-making pastor. They're taught how to preach, they're taught exegesis, they're [taught] church history and theology, they're taught all the classical courses that most seminaries offer, but they don't really seem to know how to translate theology and theory into practical strategy implementation.

For discipleship to happen, pastoral leaders need to know how to disciple and then mentor the laity to disciple others in the congregation. In these descriptions of discipleship, the notion was internally focused. However, some pastoral leaders saw discipleship happening outside of the walls of the church, as one United Church pastor stated:

I can probably describe more what it doesn't look like. It doesn't look like a focus on Sunday morning. And this is where I get into being a bit of a rebel, because the canons of theology under which clergy get trained is that worship is the supreme act, blah, blah, blah. I'm not sure. I'm not sure. I think it's more about being in a relationship with your community and engaging the people and the issues in an asset-based, hopeful, restorative mode. I think the whole 'let's gather together and sing songs to God on Sunday' is one expression of spirituality.

For this pastoral leader and others, the statements indicated that discipleship was conceived of as happening 'out there', not necessarily connected with the worship that happens within the walls of the church building.

The theme of practical discipleship training needs to be addressed in two ways: how does a congregation disciple someone after a confession of faith, and how might the theological curriculum help church leaders to strengthen their capacity to disciple and to help lay members disciple others. As mentioned above, many of the pastoral leaders spoke about discipleship more in aspirational terms and are attempting to find meaningful ways to build community so that parishioners can continue to grow in their faith. Many of the pastoral leaders made references to the lack of 'how to' make disciples in their own theological training. Aleshire (2008, pt. 4, chap. 2) has stated that, 'Learning for religious vocation does not begin with the mastery of various skill sets or acquisition of technical religious information. It begins with learning to be Christian: truly, deeply, thoughtfully, intelligently, lovingly, Christian'. Although Aleshire is correct about the beginning points of religious vocation being the love of God, the mastery of skills or the 'how to' needs more emphasis in the theological curriculum – the pastoral leaders that we interviewed spoke strongly about this. Powers (2011, 304) puts it this way as he speaks to Academic Deans:

As academic officers, it is our duty to reflect on the type of education our schools offer and also on the needs in our society and among the constituencies on which we depend for students, support, and placement … We must ask questions like: Do our graduates perform well in their profession … Do our students strive for excellence as scholars and as ministers?

The voices of pastoral leaders and Power's quote brings a healthy counterpoint to the 'being' aspect of the formation of students. We would encourage places of theological training to take seriously the opportunity to help students know 'how' to disciple others, to equip and empower others toward sustainable discipleship, and to remain 'close to the ground' to see how their graduates fare in these respects (and to adjust the curriculum accordingly).

Spiritual formation of seminary students

Third, many of the pastoral and denominational leaders talked about the importance of spiritual formation of seminary students. Even though theological educators have ident-ified this theme of spiritual formation's genesis occurring in the local parish, progressing in other settings together with the seminary, and growing after graduation in various min-istry contexts, there is an increased agreement that spiritual formation must be an integral aspect of seminary training in and outside of the classroom (Banks 1999; Edwards 1980). Recent theological literature takes spiritual formation (integrated with other aspects of the curriculum) more seriously (Powers 2011; Vallet 2011). Participants in our interviews affirmed that spiritual formation ought to happen at the seminary, in and outside of the classroom. Although these participants did not provide a formal definition of spiritual for-mation, they clearly suggested that spiritual formation is needed to address students' char-acter such as intentionally builds resilience through contexts such as internships. Not surprisingly, Catholic and Protestant pastoral leaders understood and spoke about spiritual formation in different ways. One Conservative Protestant pastor in Ontario spoke of how his own internship formed him during seminary:

> I'm a big believer in the whole year internship piece. And that really – helped equip me for I would say long-term ministry because we know the drop-out rate is huge so that year was a really valuable experience for me.

Like this Protestant pastoral leader, many of the participants described the impactful experience of their own internship that they felt was connected with their longevity in ministry. Internship provided the starting point and the professional environment to think and to incorporate spiritual formational practices that eventually helped these pas-toral and denominational leaders thrive and sustain themselves in the practice of ministry. Put another way from a curricular perspective, spiritual formation in the context of intern-ship begins to teach seminary students to sustain themselves for the many demands of vocational ministry.

To practically add to this picture of spiritual formation, many Protestant pastoral and denominational leaders found themselves (voluntarily or not) involved in some type of continued formational or small group for accountability or mentoring purposes, and strongly advocated that this type of small group experience needs to begin in seminary. One pastoral leader from a mainline Protestant tradition in Ontario, who represented the voice of other pastoral leaders, passionately asserted:

> I don't know how people come out of seminary and try to lead a church without some kind of really serious, faithful, strong mentoring. I just don't know how people do it. So, we were trying to move more these days our work with other leaders, we're doing a bit of that. Trying to do some more coaching and mentoring … You need those phones calls weekly to say 'hey you

said you were going to pray with your family three times last week, how'd it go? Just want to follow up.' There's accountability, a support.

In the minds of a number of those we interviewed, the earlier these types of formational practices are incorporated, then the less likely vocational ministry dropout will occur. The viewpoint was conveyed that learning and practicing self-care and resiliency needs to begin and be incorporated more intentionally into the theological curriculum, a sentiment voiced concretely by these pastoral and denominational leaders. Internships, mentoring, accountability, and self-care are ways to operationalise spiritual formation.

On the other hand, many of the Catholic priests reflected on their own seminary education that taught them to be pastoral shepherds (and not necessarily leaders that understood well the importance of governance); they described an intentional process of spiritual formation and what it meant to them. They made references to their Program for Priestly Formation (2002), in one way or another. In this document, Catholic spiritual formation is described in terms of a full integration that not just centres on intellectual development but also on human, spiritual, and pastoral development as well:

> Given the great amount of essential material to be studied, it is important that the curriculum as a whole be planned and consistently communicated to the seminarians, faculty and others involved in the theological education of future priests. Such planning takes into account the integrated formation of the seminarian, of which intellectual development is one component and the goal of pastoral ministry the overall concern. (Program for Priestly Formation 2002, 34)

In other words, for Catholic pastoral leaders, the discourse around spiritual formation was not so much focused on what seminary students know; but, rather, on who they are. However, both mainline and conservative Protestant pastoral leaders' descriptions of their own spiritual formation seemed less integrative and more focused on the acquisition of knowledge. As a consequence, these Protestant pastoral leaders had a concern for any theological curriculum that might lack intentionality, coherence, and depth around spiritual formation of seminary students. These Protestant pastoral leaders had seen the negative results in ministerial practice of new graduates, especially around issues of: ministerial longevity, relationships with governing boards, a call for mentorship, the lack of character, and the need for continuing education. Among pastoral leaders from various ecclesial traditions and in order to move the discussion ahead, a common definition of spiritual formation is needed in addition to enhanced discussions on the preferred effects that enhanced spiritual formation might have on pastoral leaders and seminary students.

The spiritual formation and theological curriculum literature is beginning to address the importance of spiritual formation of seminary students from the perspective of both theological educators and congregations. First, theological educators are becoming more aware of a theological curriculum that balances spiritual formation and academic learning. Senior and Weber (1994) have stated that the connection between the theological curriculum and spiritual formation is driven by the mission of the seminary. Mercier (2011, 324) went a step further and suggested that the theological school should explore further its corporate culture,

> We often view formation, especially spiritual formation, as something a school does, a function, rather than a foundational element of its very nature. We are accustomed to thinking of the intellectual and professional formation of individuals, but as communities of faith, theological schools – like any other school – embody and transmit critical values and vision that, one hopes, are rooted in an implicit sense of the school's identity.

What Mercier is getting at entails theological schools continually working to foster a more integrated and integrating perspective on spiritual formation, not only in its theological curriculum but also in its very nature and mission.

Our findings show that pastoral and denominational leaders spoke about the importance of spiritual formation of seminary students from different perspectives. More specifically, what we see is the different understandings of spiritual formation from the various ecclesial traditions. Much of the definitions or descriptions of spiritual formation is bound by ministerial context and its effects on pastoral leaders. However, what seems to be common, from the perspective of theological educators, is the striving for the educational quality of that formation for ministry practice. Educational quality is connected to the theological curriculum outcomes.

Congregations are beginning to see spiritual formation in the context of discipleship that is moving from knowledge content to identity formation. The missional church movement literature has led the way in connecting discipleship to spiritual formation. More specifically, if discipleship is about identity that is formed and transformed by Christ,

> Spiritual formation is the continual aligning of the disciple's life to the intentions of God as he [God] works in and through that life. Discipleship as identity means spiritual formation doesn't just help us know what God intends for us to know or to do what God intends for us to do; instead spiritual formation helps us become what God intended us to be. (Beard 2015, 180)

This means that if identity formation is not addressed:

> the focus of spiritual formation (has) become information and behavior; expectations [are often] reduced to attending church produced Bible classes and behaving in a moral fashion by community standards. While information and behavior are certainly important aspects of spiritual formation, the concept of missional discipleship is built on the presumption that they were never meant to be the end, but rather the means by which transformation takes place. (Beard 2015, 179)

Breen (2011, 28) emphatically stated, 'Discipleship isn't a random assortment of facts and propositions and behaviours, discipleship is something that is you to the core and is completely incarnated in you'. The implications of this connection between discipleship and spiritual formation to theological educators from pastoral leaders is twofold: (1) It may provide a way to frame or reframe curricular outcomes and pedagogy; and (2) It provides seminary students with a way or structure to conceptualise congregational spiritual formation and discipleship so that actionable steps may be taken.

What seems to be happening is a silo effect where theological educators and pastoral and denominational leaders are attempting to address spiritual formation issues in their own contexts but not communicating well with one another. In identifying this gap, we would encourage conversations between pastoral and denominational leaders and theological educators that build understanding that results in ways to relate with one another. This would possibly result in bridging the gap between classroom learning, the theological curriculum, and pastoral practice.

Missional and organizational training

The final theme about which pastoral and denominational leaders spoke clearly was related to the need to be trained as missiologists, as well as in how to lead organisations.

In the training and education of future pastoral leaders, it was asserted that students must be able to understand deeply, read accurately, and work in the local contexts that they find themselves serving in. The training and education of these future pastoral leaders was not just for professional ministry to maintain the existence of the church institution, but also, and importantly, for missional engagement with the neighbourhood outside of the parish walls. For many of the pastoral leaders, this understanding of contextualising ministry was framed in theological language. In one of the focus groups in Ontario, a pastoral leader stated,

> A flourishing congregation is not a maintenance church or just a church that is seeking to survive, you know … it's a church that understands the whole dynamic of the width of the kingdom of God; the vastness of the kingdom, and the ability that, you know, the sky's the limit as we say sometimes in our context.

In the same focus group, other pastoral leaders endorsed the theological framework, but shared more concretely of the practical implications of the kingdom of God by giving examples of flourishing congregations in Canada that connect well with the local community:

> (Name of the church) [has] 3,500 people on an average Sunday, the largest evangelical church in the French-speaking world. And it's here in Canada. Most have never heard of it. And they feed 8,000 people every month out of that one church … An eight-million-dollar budget they've raised from corporations. And everything that they do, they're teaching how to budget, they feed the poor, everything they do—they do programs for drug rehab. Everything is about evangelism. You see in French-speaking Québec you can't steal from another congregation, because there aren't any other congregations to steal from. It's not like here where the churches get people from other churches to come to theirs because they have a bigger church. They can't do that because there is nobody to steal from. Every church in Québec is less than 40 people.

Other pastoral leaders spoke of the after graduation need for seminary students to continue to develop and have practical missiological skills to read and reach out to the local context; that is to say, skills to be life-long learners, especially in theologically and socially diverse contexts. An Anglican priest reflected back on his own theological education:

> I don't think the model that's going on in the seminary is keeping up with what's going on here. It's important to learn about the Cambridge Latitudinarian and all that sort of stuff; I love that stuff; that's what I do. But, it didn't really help me to be a parish priest. The entrepreneurial piece, management stuff … one of the concerns we pick up in England is send them to seminary for three years no matter how missional they were when they go in, they're institutional when they come out. You train the entrepreneur out of them.

Another ethnic pastoral leader from Ontario put his thoughts this way with respect to learning,

> Because I think one of the challenging things that I always find when I work with other pastors … I find that in that context and the experience that I see and even now in a non-Chinese context most of the pastor they're leaders, they are not learners.

Pastoral and denominational leaders singled out another element to missiological training and practice: studying, understanding, and working in diverse social settings. As we

pressed participants on what exactly they had in mind they mainly pointed toward any or all of the following: race, gender, social class, sexual orientation, and age. For some congregations this diversity was a lived reality from their leadership group through to those sitting in the pews, something that previous research reveals is more common in Canada than in the United States (Bird 2015; Reimer and Wilkinson 2015). A conservative Protestant pastor in Calgary stressed,

> I think a flourishing congregation is one that's diverse in its generation, in its ethnicities. I think a comment was made in the focus group – it reflects the community it's in … If your church is all white and it's surrounded by tons of different ethnic populations, I wonder what's going on there. Like if there's an unawareness about that, that's really sad.

A pastoral leader in Winnipeg talked of the millionaire sitting alongside the unemployed; while other leaders spoke of members of the LGBTQ community actively participating as full members in their congregation. For others, they agreed that diversity is important, but remains an aspiration that their congregation is pursuing.

With diversity and the openness to people openly and honestly grappling with their uncertainties in community, conflict is almost inevitable. We gathered from many of our conversations that flourishing congregations were seen as being characterised by strong conflict resolution skills. By this we understood them to mean that pastoral leaders must have the ability to help their congregations navigate conflict in skilful and theologically sound ways (in their view). A United Church of Canada minister reflected this as he spoke:

> If I think about the flourishing congregations that I carry in my head and the stories I'm carrying in my head right now, they have all done something good in relation to conflict … They've just relaxed about conflict. They just have relaxed and said, 'You know, sometimes we're going to have to ask people to change seats on the bus,' so leadership issues. And sometimes they'll get pissed off and leave the bus and that's okay. I think of the moment in this congregation that – two moments in this congregation where we really started to grow and flourish a little bit in numbers but more so in maturity and dynamism was when we spoke frankly about some real conflict at the ending of the previous staff configuration team. We dropped into talking circles with real sharing of pain, different points of view, but listening with respect … I think one of the things that is characteristic of so many of our not flourishing congregations is we're frozen by the fear of the conflict.

What pastoral and denominational leaders have shared indicates that a dissonance exists between what happens in the theological curriculum, in terms of teaching and learning, and what actually happens in ministerial practice and the disposition that needs to be taken to develop missiological and organizational skills for life-long learning.

How might theological educators assist seminary students becoming missiologists and effective organizational leaders alongside chaplains? From the missiological education literature, theological educators see that the theological curriculum puts a premium on 'head' knowledge that results in seminary students knowing the 'what' of ministry instead of knowing the 'how' of ministry. Shaw (2006, 27–28) bluntly stated,

> One of the most common lessons we teach seminarians is that the best way to help people grow spiritually is for them to be schooled in the Bible and theology. Put more simply, we teach our students that "schooling" = "education" … A premium is placed on the accumulation of information, and this priority on head knowledge is subconsciously transferred to ministry.

However, the curricular shift in theological education towards balancing formation model of education with the classic model of education (Powers 2011) will better aid seminary students to know 'how' to minister in a diverse cultural and organizational setting. Missiological studies is beginning to find a proper place in the theological curriculum (Banks 1999; Kim 2015) and the use of cross-cultural field education learning experiences in the theological curriculum is providing hands-on experiences in connecting classroom theory with ministry practice (Blodgett and Floding 2015; Marmon 2010). Centres for theological training may also wish to strategically expose students to courses in the social sciences, notably sociology, that help pastors to be good students of people and culture. This would include, for example, strengthened understanding of how individual and neighbourhood demographics (e.g., age, race, gender, socioeconomic status) impact congregational life. Further, some of these 'how to' skills need to focus on leadership development and conflict resolution not only in the classroom, but in field contexts such as internships too. What are the organizational dynamics and challenges that clergy might anticipate in congregational ministry, and how might their training better prepare them for such settings?

In sum, from our participants' perspective there are many opportunities for theological educators to broaden and deepen seminary curriculum. One vein of this possible shift and enhancement involves a greater focus on 'how to' practitioner-oriented domains. This pivot may necessitate different persons being hired in educational settings; where those who have the academic credentials also have practical pastoral experience. Another element entails broader foci to themes on leadership, conflict management, studying culture, and so forth. Here too, theological educators need to be hired with such skillsets as enable them to maximally prepare pastoral leaders for the congregations that they will soon lead.

Conclusion

This article brings forward the voices of pastoral and denominational leaders from the Catholic, mainline Protestant, and conservative Protestant ecclesial traditions regarding a question that theological educators might benefit from paying attention to; namely, how might the theological curriculum be revised so that seminary students would be better prepared for the realities of professional pastoral practice? The four themes highlight areas wherein theological educators might give their further reflection, as relates to the theological curriculum. Although pastoral and denominational leaders identified the discontinuity between their own theological education learning experiences and their present pastoral practices, the literature indicates that theological educators are beginning to listen to the voices or confirm the pastoral experiences of pastoral leaders in reshaping the theological curriculum to make it relevant and accessible.

Also, this article has brought out the voices of theological educators and demonstrated the actual ways in which they are revising the theological curriculum so as to seriously consider professional practice and spiritual formation. Each group, pastoral leaders and theological educators, has a rich diversity of learning experiences that indicate that there is no one right way to do theological education. The task of the article was to describe the educational and pastoral richness of each group's attempt to speak into the training of professionals for religious leadership. With these sometimes similar and differing understandings and goals

for theological education, perhaps the present and next step is for both pastoral leaders and theological educators to 'get on the same page' and intentionally work together for the sake of the formation of seminary students in order for the Church to flourish.

Notes

1. Based on 109 pastoral and denominational leaders interviews and 9 focus groups across the Roman Catholic, mainline, and conservative Protestant settings, a multi-dimensional understanding of flourishing congregations emerged which consisted of three domains and a number of constructs/variables in brackets: (1) Organizational Ethos (Self-Identity, Leadership, Innovation, and Structures and Process); (2) Internal (Discipleship, Engaged Laity, Hospitable Community, and Diversity); and (3) External (Neighbourhood Involvement, Evangelism, and Partnerships). For a fuller description see our article, Thiessen et al. (2018).
2. For the purposes of this article, theory will initially mean classroom learning. However, we are aware that what often happens in the classroom context is that theory is discussed with both the application of formal academic learning to pastoral practice and with the decisions that pastoral leaders must make in the context of ministry. Professional practice involves a consciously performed intentional activity that by its very nature can only be made intelligible by reference to the often tacit, and at best partially articulated, schemes of thought in terms of which pastoral leaders make sense of what they are doing. Hence pastoral leaders are only able to engage in practices by virtue of their ability to characterize their own practice and construe the practices of others in ways that presuppose, usually implicitly, a set of beliefs about what they are doing, the situation in which they are operating, and what they are trying to achieve.
3. Mallon defines missionary disciples as a universal call to holiness and mission. The call to holiness and mission is rooted not in a religious profession but in baptism.

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