Spiritual Formation for Ordained Ministry: An Ecumenical Approach

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Abstract. Seminaries have a responsibility to engage students in reflecting upon the spiritual life, as well as providing opportunities to deepen their own spiritual journeys. It also is important that they consider the intentional ways that their understandings and experiences of the spiritual life influence their leadership in the Church. Spiritual formation of seminarians provides particular challenges to faculty of liberal, ecumenical seminaries. This article describes a course designed to address these issues and argues that spiritual formation can be effectively integrated into the curricula of liberal, ecumenical seminaries.

A dynamic spiritual life is essential for effective ordained ministry. To walk with others on their journeys of faith, a pastor must have a walk of his or her own. Without a pastor who points others to God as the center of their lives and the life of the church, it often becomes difficult to distinguish a Christian church from a social club or social service agency. The Christian church’s core belief is in God’s presence and the importance of practices that draw the church and its members into deeper relationships with God. It is out of that core that the church learns and practices community, hospitality, and mission to the world. That core is the spiritual life.

Howard Rice suggests that the most appropriate image of the pastor is as a spiritual guide, as people look to a pastor “for a model of being in the world that is anchored in God. They seek, sometimes with near despair, someone who can point them toward depth and meaning. They turn to their pastors in the hope that they will find someone who will suffer with them in their struggles and rejoice with them in their recurring discovery of God’s unexpected presence” (Rice 1998, 34–35). Therefore, Rice argues, “church members believe their pastors are people who know God, who have a deep and personal relationship with God as evidenced in a life of prayer” (37). In books and articles addressing the health and effectiveness of pastors, the importance of the pastor’s own relationship with God is named and addressed in various ways. John Mogabgab, in his introduction to Communion, Community, Commonweal: Readings for Spiritual Leadership, suggests that what parishioners really need is “leaders who live without pretense and whose eyes shine with the radiance that comes from spending time with God” (Mogabgab 1995, 12). Glenn Hinson writes, “The central concern of a Christian leader should be the same as that of every Christian, namely, an intimate personal relationship with God. You want to know God, to partake of the life of God, not just know about God” (Hinson 1999, 36).

So how might a seminary that values its ecumenicity offer courses to encourage students to understand the importance of spiritual leadership, and to realize that their own relationships with God deeply influence their abilities to practice this leadership? This paper describes the development and format of a course designed to address spiritual formation of ordination candidates in an ecumenical seminary grounded within the Reformed tradition. I understand spiritual formation to be the process by which a person becomes more acutely aware of God’s presence in one’s life, desires it as a way of life, and intentionally develops practices (or patterns) that will draw one closer to God. Such practices include those that deepen one’s own relationship with God, those that help to build relationships with others that function as “spiritual friendships,” and those that manifest one’s relationship with the Holy as one lives the daily life. My understanding of spiritual leadership of a pastor begins with understanding spirituality as Christian, grounded in a relationship with God, and within a Christian community. It is less about self-development and more about opening oneself to the grace and gifts of the God who calls us into ordained leadership.
A historical theological concern regarding institutionalizing spiritual development within the preparation of Reformed clergy was excessively focused on “methods and techniques that imply a works salvation” (Hinson 1999, 33). Theological issues around works salvation are just as strong in today’s approach to spirituality, yet they must be recognized in the midst of other concerns. Today’s students preparing for ordination often have more of a cultural understanding of spirituality than one grounded in a faith tradition. For many, spirituality means nurturing one’s own spirit in whatever ways seem helpful, perhaps with no sense of God as essential to the process. Another concern at the school where I teach is that many adults attend seminary as “spiritual seekers,” rather than as mature Christians preparing for leadership in congregations.

The questions around how to address the spiritual life of seminarians are especially challenging within a seminary that is intentionally ecumenical and theologically liberal. The seminary’s primary denominational constituencies include the United Church of Christ, United Methodist, Presbyterian Church (USA), Episcopal, and Unitarian Universalist. The student body includes other denominations and fellowships, but naming these five suggests the theological challenges and the diversity in understanding the spiritual life on one campus. The course this paper addresses is required of all seniors seeking a Master of Divinity degree. The seminary is very clear that it is a Christian seminary, but sensitivity to students with diverse theological and spiritual perspectives is part of the school’s commitment.

Course Development
When I joined the seminary faculty in 1991, one of my standing assignments was the course around issues in professional ordained ministry. For several years it had focused on the relationship between ecclesiology and denominational issues, although through research and interviews it was evident that students experienced the course as redundant to other studies. It also was clear that there were other issues important to address as students moved from seminary to ordained ministry; this course was an opportunity to do that.

The process of reshaping the course began with interviewing recent seminary graduates and seasoned pastors. The questions of transition to their first call and issues around self-care and burnout were vivid for many clergy with whom I spoke. I asked several clergy three questions: “What is one thing you wish you had done your first year in the parish?” “What is one thing you wish you had not done your first year?” “What is one thing you wish you had known before you began parish ministry?” The responses to the first two questions received expected responses, including staff roles, timing of changes, culture, conflict, and boundaries in terms of time and family. These issues are now more intentionally addressed in the seminary’s curriculum, including within this course. As one with pastoral experience, the responses to the last question really caught my attention.

What clergy wished they had known about before beginning parish ministry included how to keep their own spiritual lives vibrant in the midst of caring for others, the overwhelming loneliness that comes with the job, the lack of collegiality among clergy, and the struggle to maintain a strong sense of self-esteem in the midst of parish leadership. Prayer became a responsibility to pray in public, as one pastor commented, “I am better at praying for others than myself.” Issues around friendships with other clergy and the necessity of a healthy support system were named in several ways. One experienced pastor said, “I can’t be honest with my clergy colleagues; they see me as competition for the next call.” Questions around maintaining a strong sense of call arose from both new and experienced clergy: “How do I maintain a sense of self when my priority is always others?” “Sometimes I wonder if God is the center of my ministry, or if it has become just another job.” The more I listened, the more I wondered what a course might look like that at least began to intentionally address these issues.

What emerged a decade ago was a course focusing on spiritual formation and ministry, and it continues to change and evolve. Course objectives are that by the end of the course, students (1) will have examined their own understandings of vocation and pastoral identity, (2) will have practiced a variety of personal spiritual practices, (3) will have participated in a “spiritual friends” group, and (4) will have explored aspects of nurturing the spiritual life of a congregation.

As noted earlier, there is a deep concern in the Reformed tradition that a focus on spirituality will lean towards a works approach to salvation. Another component is Calvin’s understanding of piety as “faithfully living.” The third aspect considered in the development of this course is that it is important to be in community, in relationships that nurture our relationships with God. These aspects became the primary foci of the course: attending to the inner life, where the primary focus is one’s relationship with God; the relationship life, including being able to share and learn from another person seeking God’s heart; and the corporate/public life, as one’s spiritual gifts are shared with the church and the world.

To illustrate each aspect of the spiritual life, yet emphasize their interrelationships, I developed a three-circle model of a holistic spiritual life, which is integrated throughout the course. The emphasis of circle one is spiritual practices deepening one’s relationship with God, circle two is spiritual friends groups, and
circle three is the final emphasis of the course, nurturing the spiritual lives of others.

**Circle I: Personal Spiritual Patterns**

Central to the minister’s spiritual life is the practice of spiritual patterns that strengthen one’s relationship with God. I find *patterning* a helpful way to engage students in both the classic spiritual disciplines and the practices of faith. The image of pattern suggests the need to integrate it into one’s life; students engage this language more easily than the image of discipline.

To broaden students’ understanding of various spiritual patterning and ways of approaching the spiritual life, students work with Corinne Ware’s instrument of spiritual types early in the course (Ware 1995). Ware draws upon Urban Holmes’s work that suggests people approach and engage in the spiritual life in various ways, and presents a typology of spirituality that identifies four schools of spirituality. The multiple choice instrument in Ware’s text invites students to identify ways in which they personally approach the spiritual life and where they fall on the “Spirituality Wheel,” which is her adaptation of Holmes's typology: speculative/kataphatic – a head spirituality which is primarily a “thinking” approach; affective/kataphatic – a heart spirituality drawing upon a more charismatic, affective way of connecting with God; affective/apophatic – a mystic spirituality that is more interested in being with God than expressing oneself to God; and speculative/apophatic – a kingdom spirituality that is committed to witnessing to God’s work in the world.

One of the challenges pastors encounter in nurturing the spiritual lives of parishioners is not to assume that what works for the pastor will work for everyone else. Students reflect on what approaches are more comfortable and more challenging to them personally, as well as hear their colleagues’ very different experiences and patterning through other approaches to spirituality. This tool invites students to a deeper self-understanding, as well as more awareness of how others live the spiritual life. This begins the course-long emphasis on diversity of the spiritual life within a congregation. Students find it helpful to engage in self-reflection and to have a way to remember the diversity within a congregation. They work with it early in the term and students often refer back to it throughout the course.

Once students grapple with the diverse ways people understand and approach the spiritual life, they practice different spiritual patterns, one pattern per week. The five practices in which students engage during the course have changed over the years the course has been taught, but the three reasons for this aspect of the course remain clear. First, students preparing for the practice of ordained ministry need to have some ability to be self-reflective in their own spiritual practices; students write one-page reflections to facilitate that process. The challenge in a culture that encourages a narcissistic approach to self-development is to name the Reformers’ concerns described earlier in this paper and address them. Students often talk about the ways these practices benefit them; it is an ongoing challenge to encourage them to understand spiritual practices as ways to draw closer to God, not primarily as a way to feel better about one’s self. As a teacher, I struggle with the tension between hoping they understand that the spiritual life is about drawing closer to God and encouraging them to step back and be reflective about their own practices. I also try to stay open to the variety of theological approaches represented by the students; my responsibility is not to change their theology to be like mine, but to teach them ways to understand how their theology shapes their spiritual journeys.

Second, the course exposes students to spiritual practices that might be unfamiliar, as well as encourages them to continue to practice ones they already know. Throughout one’s life, it is possible that one will be drawn to a variety of practices. The course provides opportunities to give students a larger repertoire of ways to be open to God.

Continuing the emphasis of spiritual diversity addressed with Ware’s inventory, the third reason is to strengthen one’s practice of ministry. It is essential for students to realize that the spiritual pattern that draws them deeper into their relationships with God will not do that for all of the persons they encounter in ministry. These varied practices encourage students to know and experience patterns that they may not practice but may be very beneficial to recommend to a parishioner.

*Soul Feast* (Thompson 1995) is a text that presents spiritual patterns in ways that work very well in an ecumenical context, as Thompson includes “disciplines from the ecumenical tradition that have weathered the test of time, proving to be means of grace to Christians of different histories and cultures. Such practices have consistently been experienced as vehicles of God’s presence, guidance, and call in the lives of faithful seekers” (Thompson 1995, xv). Unitarian Universalist students are invited to talk with me if any of the assigned disciplines are ones that do not fit with their theology; alternative practices within their traditions are supplemented for the ones assigned.

Patterns of student practice include the spiritual disciplines of listening for/to God, *lectio divina* (“holy reading”), prayer (either centering or intercessory), *examen*, and awareness of one’s physical body (e.g., eating/tasting, sleeping, exercise). The initial pattern of listening for/to God gets students in tune with the business and noise in their lives. *Lectio divina* integrates prayer and scripture; non-Christian students are invited to use sacred texts of their respective traditions. Initially the prayer assignment was to practice centering prayer,
but I have broadened that to allow students who practice it already to spend a week praying for others through intercessory prayer. I encourage them to remember the importance of prayer as a way to connect with God and to bring others before God. If the course includes humanists, they are encouraged to practice patterns as ways to be faithful to their spiritual theology. The practice of *examen* is often a practice that students already perform in some fashion and find it helpful to have a name and possible patterns by which to practice self-examination more intentionally.

When I began teaching the course the final practice was journaling, which students found less helpful for two reasons. First, seminary education already required a lot of writing in the learning process, and this drew them away from focusing on journaling as a spiritual practice. Second, many students included simple journaling as part of the other practices. Instead of journaling, student feedback led me to incorporate practices that focus on the body/spirit connection, and students are free to choose what they wish to practice for a week. Given the opportunity to focus on embodied spiritual patterning, students chose from a wide variety of practices, including exercise without distraction (such as earphones), addressing sleeping habits, or making dinner with their children in the midst of a busy week—anything that invites them to consider how attending (or not) to their bodies might embody (or disembody) a spiritual life. This fourth week also concludes with a guest teacher who teaches body-spirit connections, so the students have an opportunity to both reflect on their own patterning as well as experience another approach.

One of the areas of pastoral ministry that has gained much attention in recent years is manifestations of clergy not being wise in attending to themselves, including their emotional, mental, physical, and relational needs. Drawing on *Pastor as Person* (Harbaugh 1984) and *Clergy Self-Care* (Oswald 1991), students explore the ways they currently practice holistic self-care, and where the challenges are both in their personal lives and as ministerial professionals. Harbaugh presents cases of clergy who have not attended to aspects of their own lives and the ramifications of such choices; these are helpful ways to begin discussions of implications for oneself and for the practice of ministry. What has proven a helpful strategy is having students interview a minister whom they perceive to have addressed these issues. These interviews often raise issues students have not yet personally addressed, and sometimes they discover that the person has not addressed life issues as well as they had thought. It is important for persons going into ordained ministry to have a realistic understanding of the personal challenges, and the interviews facilitate that process.

Students integrate what they learned from Harbaugh, the interviews, and class discussions with their reflections on the spiritual patterns they have practiced, into a paper of spiritual self-assessment. When returning these papers, I encourage students to reread the paper a year after completing seminary. As Hinson states,

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[really serious commitment to your friendship with God requires some ways to hold yourself accountable. . . . Do not imagine that you, as a religious leader, will have fewer spiritual difficulties than others because you are engaged in “God's business.” Religious professionals may run greater risks than ordinary saints. All too readily, caught up in the affairs of religion, they begin to turn it into a performance, a role, an act, and push their personal relationships with God to the side.” (Hinson 1999, 57)
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Hinson writes drawing upon forty years as a seminary professor and Baptist pastor; feedback from alumni suggests that the challenges of the first years in ministry can too easily prove Hinson right. My hope is that students who have seriously engaged in the work of this course will be aware when this happens and have the tools to make the necessary changes.

Each time the course is taught, I receive both verbal and written feedback from students. They consistently report that the course has been very helpful and they “now know what to do.” Intrigued as to whether that knowing stays with them as they practice ministry, in 2001 I surveyed graduates of this course. I wondered what they would identify as valuable as they began in ministry, and whether aspects of the course had been helpful. I also asked for ideas of how to modify or change the course.

When asked if they had read their personal assessment papers since graduation, approximately one-third of the respondents had and (when adding comment) found it helpful. Comments included the paper being helpful in spiritual direction, in clergy support groups, to refocus, to jump-start one’s spiritual disciplines, to remind one of the importance of self-care, in clinical pastoral education, to help others (including a church council), and to provide a plan for one’s own spiritual nurture.

**Circle II: Spiritual Friends**

When I began designing the course, the feedback I received from clergy was overwhelming in the concerns around clergy loneliness and need for support. Too often when clergy gather they complain or compete. What would happen if they learned to companion each other in intentional ways? A component of the course designed to model a way of “clergy companionship” is weekly meetings of spiritual friends groups during class time. During the second class, students self-select into spiritual friends groups of three. As most courses at the
We explicitly explore the ways the course design models friends in congregations as tools for effective ministry. The role of professional spiritual directors or guides is also presented in the course, as is the role of the pastor as a spiritual guide (Rice 1998). The distinction is made between those who are gifted and equipped to be spiritual directors, pastors who often provide spiritual direction, and peers who are spiritual companions.

Usually these groups are very successful, as most students have been in other courses together and have a sense of whom they want to be with in a group. It is also evident in surveying graduates that many of these relationships continue long after graduation. Sometimes the groups remain artificial, as the members are not open with each other or they are unable to value their differences. In these cases, students reflect on what happened as well as what was gained and lost. I have learned to attend to groups that might not be going well, and I offer to meet with them or suggest constructive ways to use their group time.

### Circle III: Vocation – Nurturing the Spiritual Lives of Others

The final focus of the course invites students to begin stepping back from their own lives and consider the ways their ministry can encourage the spiritual lives of those they serve. We explore Ware’s spiritual typology, the various spiritual practices, and encouraging spiritual friends in congregations as tools for effective ministry. We explicitly explore the ways the course design models how pastors might mentor church members, as well as how it differs. It is important that students realize that all they have explored in the course to encourage their own spiritual lives is equally of value for persons to whom they minister. This process of integrating their learning into both their own lives and into their practices of ministry is a course goal.

The purpose of the course final project is to draw upon course material and other resources and develop a resource they can use in a ministry setting to nurture the spiritual lives of others. Grounded in the course material and texts, students write a rationale for their project. They then have freedom to select its form. Projects have included an adult education course, a youth retreat, a series of worship services, and various art forms (hymn writing, visual art, poetry, etc.) used in awakening and deepening the spiritual lives of others. This project is often where the student’s integration of the course is most evident. Students share their final projects with each other through presentations and handouts so that students develop a larger scope of possibilities, as well as a collection of resource sheets from each other. This process emphasizes the course design of peer learning and being in ministry together.

### Spiritual Formation within a Seminary Curriculum

The seminary where I teach is in the midst of a curriculum revision, including degree requirements and the para-academic curriculum. In reviewing the academic curriculum, there has been much discussion around how we address formation of students. We are an ecumenical seminary, and one challenge is the various denominational approaches to seminarian formation. Another challenge is the wide variety of students who enter into the Masters of Divinity degree program. Some have strong ecclesial formation and some have almost none; some practice patterns that deepen their relationship with God, and others practice spiritual patterns as a form of personal improvement; some are part of the Baby Boom generation and others are media-oriented Generation-X members. Although the vast majority of our students are practicing Christians, there are exceptions whose formation also must be addressed.

In such a diverse context, spiritual formation is multi-faceted. Within the academic area of the curriculum, courses such as the one described in this paper are very important. If seminarians are going to be equipped to serve as spiritual guides as well as they are equipped to preach, then work in spiritual theology and practices must be part of a student’s education. To leave this material separate from courses is to suggest falsely that there is no viable scholarship and that formation only goes as deep as spiritual practices. If one is called to be the spiritual leader and mentor of many, a strong theological foundation is essential. It is also critical that pastors not try to impose their spiritual patterns on unsuspecting parishioners, who then experience failure – and are unable to distinguish between failures in practicing a specific pattern from their perception that somehow they have failed in the spiritual life.

It is important that course assignments reflect both academic and experiential learnings within the course. A concern that arose among my faculty colleagues when I began offering courses in the spiritual life was grading students in academic courses incorporating spiritual practices as required assignments. Luther was right; many of my faculty colleagues are Reformed and very concerned that these types of courses suggest a works approach to salvation. I have argued that being able to reflect on one’s spiritual practices is a skill similar to other skills taught in the areas of practical theology. For example, my students are told, “I am not grading your actual prayer life, either the quality of your prayer or...
the content of your prayer. What I will appropriately evaluate is your understanding of the readings we do regarding prayer and your ability to thoughtfully reflect on the practice of prayer, how it is or is not part of your life as a Christian and a minister, and how you will help others deepen their lives of prayer.” If I am clear about the boundaries of evaluation, I find students ready and willing to engage in the content and process of the course. They are building a theological and theoretical foundation for the spiritual life they practice and invite others to experience.

As essential as explicit courses addressing the spiritual life are, seminarians benefit from courses throughout the academic curriculum that incorporate opportunities to explore how the methodology and content of that course can strengthen, challenge, and deepen one’s relationships with God, others, and God’s world. Professors often assume the students understand the implicit aspects of the spiritual life within a course. It is essential that the implicit be made explicit so that students are given opportunities to consider, reflect, and discuss the aspects of the course that are part of spiritual formation. For example, how does one’s spiritual life intersect with one’s ethical stances? How does one’s theology of the Persons of the Trinity shape one’s prayer life? Does one’s image of God influence one’s language of prayer?

Within the broad seminary curriculum, are students invited to experience God as well as learn about God? In addition to the classroom contexts, spiritual formation is fostered in corporate worship; in groups that gather to practice spiritual patterns such as walking a labyrinth, journaling, and lectio divina; and through opportunities to meet with spiritual directors. But equally essential, spiritual formation happens in social action groups, in campus opportunities to serve others, and in how members of a seminary community extend hospitality both to each other and to the strangers within their midst. The seminary must model the depth and breadth of the holistic spiritual life that it hopes the seminarian will engender in his/her life in ministry.

I used to be skeptical that curricular integration of the spiritual formation of seminarians was possible at a liberal ecumenical seminary. I am no longer. In exit interviews of students preparing to graduate, they frequently name this course as “very important” in their preparation for ordained ministry. Even after being in ministry for a few years, it is still true. Of the graduates who responded to my survey in 2001, most were seriously engaged in their spiritual journeys and the course had provided both knowledge and experiences from which they draw as clergy. If the spiritual life is understood as incorporating one’s own relationship with God, one’s relationships with friends who encourage the spiritual life, and the responsibility to serve God’s world faithfully, the liberal ecumenical seminary is well suited to integrate intentional spiritual formation throughout the school’s curriculum.

References