

**THE TASK IS FORMATION:
A REFLECTION FOR PEOPLE THINKING ABOUT SEMINARY**

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Prayerbook lessons for Education:

Deuteronomy 6.4-9, 20-25; 2 Timothy 3.14-4.5; Matthew 11.25-30

As people consider entering seminary and as seminary students move through their course of preparation, some fundamental questions often arise: What is the purpose of time spent in seminary? How does it relate to the ministries from which I have come and for which I am preparing? A seminary is an academic institution, but ministry is not academic, so how does seminary time relate to ministry? Is going to seminary even helpful for ministry, let alone essential?

The short answer is that studying at a seminary offers not only an education but also an experience of formation that can set the tone, direction, depth and breadth of one's ministry into the indefinite future.

That answer, however, immediately raises another question: What is formation? That is the question I wish to address here. And I start with the scriptures that the Book of Common Prayer assigns for the theme of education.

"Hear, O Israel," proclaims the writer of Deuteronomy, "the Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your might." About this commandment, the *Shema*, the writer says, "Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. . . . Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as a frontlet on your forehead."

Oh, how I loved the projects we did in Sunday School when I was a boy! In one of those projects we actually made frontlets — little paper boxes with the *Shema* written in tiny letters on tiny bits of paper — and tied them to our foreheads with string. I remember thinking, "What might it have been like to walk around with such frontlets?" I didn't have the concept of formation then, but I certainly felt the power of formation, the power of wearing such frontlets to incline one's heart to the knowledge and the love of God in one's life.

From the Second Letter to Timothy we hear how scripture is "inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness." And so it is, for it is the Bible that sets forth a definitive story of how God has interacted with

the human community, and it is that story that defines and nourishes our faith. The letter opens with the writer rejoicing over how Timothy was formed by the faith of two women: his grandmother Lois and his mother Eunice, their life and love forming in him the story of God's love for him.

The Prayerbook collects these scriptures around the theme of Education, and education is indeed a centerpiece of our life together at General. To educate is to develop the faculties and powers of a person by teaching, instruction, or schooling, and we in Episcopal theological education certainly seek to do that. We do want you to know things, many things, in fact, about the Bible, church history, theology, ethics, liturgy, spirituality, ministry and mission. As in Jesus' image of the scribe of the kingdom of God, we wish to bring out for you from our own studies what is old in the tradition and what is new in our contemporary world. Education: that's what the Ph.D.s and Th.D.s are about on the faculties. Education includes all the information that students hear, engage and argue about in seminary.

Yet, important as it is, education is part of a broader, more diffuse, more difficult to define and yet more important task, and that is the work of formation. We in the seminaries seek to be formational communities – and I can say that with confidence about every Episcopal seminary. Indeed, whether we like it or not, we are and always will be formational communities, whether for good or for ill, so we must be intentional about being formational for good.

According to the dictionary, the form of something is its due or proper shape, the orderly arrangement of its parts. In philosophy, the form of something can be its structure, its pattern, or, drawing on the thought of Plato, its essential nature. To form – the verb – means to construct or frame or, closer to our situation, mold or develop by discipline or instruction.

What do we mean by formation? What do we mean by saying that a central quality and aim of our life in a seminary is formation?

Formation was the topic of a conversation of theologians convened some years ago by the Episcopal Church's then Presiding Bishop. He was asking us questions: What is formation? How does it happen? How can it be encouraged? Some were hesitant to use the word formation, worrying that the term can be perceived as abridging human agency and individual freedom. A medievalist observed that the heavy-handedness of many novice masters has brought the term into disfavor in some convents and monasteries. On the other hand, networks of educators in the Episcopal Church are now calling themselves Christian formation networks rather than Christian education networks. Overall, I'd say formation is a useful word in the tradition and that it expresses much of what we seek to be in a seminary community. Faculty use it routinely for what we're about.

Formation, I suggest, is the intentional quality of our life that is designed to nourish Christian maturity and faithfulness in ministry. Here I have in mind the purpose the writer to the Ephesians expresses for the various spiritual gifts: "to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ" (Ephesians 4.12-13). Maturity for each of us means growing into whatever the fullness of the image of God might be in each of us. As Christ shows forth the very being of God in the human story, so maturing means growing into the full stature of Christ. Ministry is the direction of our formation in a seminary. Beyond imparting the content and skills of ministry, the task of formation is to nurture faithfulness in ministry. That means keeping faith with the presence of Christ in our lives and keeping faith with what Christ is up to in the world.

Formation means cultivating availability to God. Availability has a sense of potential, of possibility. To cultivate availability to God is to stimulate a person to a possible way to be present to God and to work with God in ministry. But let me make that plural: Formation means cultivating availabilities to God — multiple availabilities to God, various ways of being present to God and working with God through an array of availabilities. So formation is not coercion. It is not a cookie-cutter production of ministry widgets. Rather, it is the creation of an environment in which persons are stimulated to be available to God in ways that promote their own Christian maturity and faithfulness in ministry.

All the elements of a seminary's educational program play a role in formation. Course work in each academic field plays a role in cultivating your availability to God toward maturity in ministry, whether in Bible, history, theology, ethics, liturgy, music, spirituality, ministry or mission. Field education, immersion programs, cross-cultural internships, and clinical practicums are very different ways of cultivating your availability to God. As faculty impart the academic content that is our expertise, we are seeking to stimulate dispositions and habits of reflection: the disposition to reflect biblically, to reflect historically, to reflect psychologically, to reflect missionally, and so on. Suggesting such dispositions and habits is central to formation. At the same time, you will find us pressing the specifically formational questions: How does this content speak to your personhood? How is it promoting your growth? How is it transforming your perspective? How is it interacting with your vision of ministry?

Beyond the classroom, we in the seminaries intend our community life to be formational. In our worship life we seek to form eagerness for prayer and common worship. In our quiet days we seek to form a disposition toward contemplation. Through hands-on engagement with the wider world both at home and abroad we seek to nurture a passion for justice that will make no peace with oppression. In our common meals, we seek to form a disposition of ease in friendship. In our community get-togethers we seek to form

a habit of intentional togetherness and readiness for both discussion and celebration. In our internal organization we seek to form a disposition toward collaboration in decision-making for ministry. In all these things and under all these things and through all these things, we seek to form dispositions toward relating transparently with God and one another, toward caring deeply for the whole person in one another. In short, love of God and love of neighbor.

In this vision, you can see how our high aspiration for you is matched by a high aspiration for ourselves. Christian maturity and faithfulness in ministry is our aspiration for you. The formation we seek to offer represents a high aspiration for ourselves. We will fulfill that self-expectation in many ways and at many points, thanks be to God. I know also that we fail and make mistakes, and will doubtless continue to do so. In the seminaries where I have ministered I sense a strong commitment among faculty and administration to be the most faithful formational communities we can be. That faithfulness calls us to confess and learn from our mistakes. I hope that among our seminaries you will find a community constantly under construction, persistently self-critical, restless to discern how we can do what we do better, more faithfully, more formationally.

I hope that we will have the grace many times to join Jesus in his prayer: "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will." Sometimes we might pray that prayer as a thanksgiving for the fruit of our interaction with you. Sometimes we might pray that prayer as a thanksgiving for what God has done with you despite our earnest but stumbling efforts.

So seminary offers not only education but formation. The task of formation is central precisely because ministry is the vocation for which seminary students are preparing. Faculty and administrators are at one with students in a shared love for God and love for the people of God who are the church. We join in a shared passion for ministry and a vision for participating in the mission of God in the world, which, as the Catechism puts it, is "to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ."

Such love, passion and vision are the environment for ministry preparation that the seminaries of the Episcopal Church are called to offer. The task is formation. Thanks be to God!

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