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**IMPACT OF CONTEXT ON  
THEOLOGICAL FIELD  
EDUCATION**

Panelists: Lorraine Ste-Marie, Cam Harder,  
and Joan Wyatt

Moderated by: Abigail Johnson

# Impact of Context on Theological Field Education

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## Introduction: Abigail Johnson

When we ask students to engage in theological reflection, we are usually attentive to their ability to connect a specific encounter or event with the biblical text or a theological theme or construct. We want them to become pastorally aware, bringing spiritual gifts to their engagement with contextual events. We want them to reflect, looking for God's spirit at work. We want them to become more self-conscious about their own theological methodology and to become aware of the theological worldviews of those they encounter. We want them to develop a practice of ministry that is compassionate and wise, aware of family systems analysis, use and abuse of power and boundary issues. We want them to develop clarity about their pastoral identity and learn how to enter a pastoral relationship.

Through the process of asking students to theologically reflect on ministry issues that arise, we ask them to dig deep into their feelings, their ways of thinking, their spiritual discernment and their visions for ministry. Despite the rigorous demands we place upon our students, there is one area that needs more attention in our theological reflection process and that is context. What is hardest to get at as we walk with students in their theological education process is raising awareness of context as they theologically reflect. When we call ourselves an Association for Theological Field Education, often the word "field" is assumed. The field is where the students are placed. The field is the hospital room, the prison visiting room, the pulpit, the congregation, the Christian education program, and the street ministry. Yet the field, as context for ministry, is more complex and requires more attention. As Marcel Proust once said, "the real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes but in having new eyes." Having new eyes for the context that we presume and assume is part of the task of theological field education.

When considering the issue of context, a question arises about what we mean when we refer to context. What are the contextual lenses through which we view any particular moment that a student encounters in their theological field education placement?

Looking at context is rather like looking at the surface of a pond. If we throw in a stone that represents the question "What is context?" we set in motion radiating rings of contextual awareness. The first layer of awareness is our immediate engagement with others. In that engagement, perhaps through a conversation, we are aware of language, education, gender, sexual orientation, worldview and theological worldview, culture, ethnic background, faith, income, and power. That conversation takes place against a backdrop of local or regional community, urban, rural or suburban community, national, international and global community. In looking closely at the impact of those various communities, we need to examine context through political, social, economic, geographic, demographic and historical lens. As a faith community, we bring another layer of contextual analysis as we enter into dialogue that may be ecumenical and multi-faith, being attentive to denominational structure and declared and operative theology. Even in a so-called "secular" environment, we are looking for a God that works within history, within geography, within political structures, in other words, a God that is at work within context.

As our Association continues to push at the edges of what it means to engage in theological reflection on ministry issues, we need to become more attentive to the perplexity and complexity of context. Our students come from those contexts so we need to understand who are our students and why are they coming to our universities and seminaries. Also, we are preparing our students to minister within contexts beyond our institutional walls, so how are we preparing them to be more contextually aware. Jesus was contextually aware when he advised us to be innocent as doves and wise as serpents. We need to prepare our students to be aware of context so that they can offer compassion to a world in need and yet be savvy about what that world is all about. Our three panelists are going to offer their thoughts about the context in which they engage in theological field education and the way it has shaped their curriculum and field education program.

### **Lorraine Ste-Marie**

Lorraine Ste-Marie is Director of the Centre for Ministry Formation, Saint Paul University, Ottawa, Ontario. The Centre for Ministry Formation welcomes candidates for ordained and lay ministry for vocational discernment and ministry formation. As director, she works closely with a team of pastoral educators to provide an integral ministry formation process which includes intellectual, human, spiritual and pastoral development. Lorraine is a member of the editing board of Theological Field Educators Abstracts, an electronic abstract journal for field education. She is also a consultant for adult faith development with the Archdiocese of Ottawa and has served on the Executive Steering Committee of the Canadian Association of Ministries Program, a network of ministry formation and adult faith programs across Canada. Lorraine has a Master of Arts (Theology) in Ethics from Saint Paul University and is currently writing her dissertation for a Doctor of Ministry degree at McMaster Divinity College in Hamilton, Ontario. As well as her academic studies in theology and administration, Lorraine has engaged in intensive practical training in the facilitation of conflict resolution, formative spirituality, pastoral liturgy as well as the “immunity-to-change” language technology with Minds at Work in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Her current research interests focus on the relationship between language and transformational learning in vision-based pastoral leadership.

## **Contextual Lens for Theological Field Education**

The contextual lens for field education which I have chosen to address is the vision of church and ministry of the formation community in which ministry formation takes place. Ministry formation at Saint Paul University is shaped by its social and historical location, both of which are deeply interconnected with its particular vision of ministry and church, and all of which have changed over the years. It is that particular vision of ministry and church which is one of the contextual lenses for field education—a vision which shapes each of the student’s pastoral practice as well as theological reflection. I offer you some specific details from my socio-historical context.

Saint Paul University’s roots go back to 1848, when the Roman Catholic bishop of Ottawa (an Oblate of Mary Immaculate) opened a small college for Roman Catholic men. The Oblates strategically located this college on the Ottawa River—the dividing line between what was then Lower Canada (Quebec which is predominantly French) and Upper Canada (Ontario which is predominantly English). Ottawa was and continues to be the meeting place for Canada’s two official cultures, English and French. Throughout its many transformations in status, staffing, student population and programming, Saint Paul University has become much more

ecumenical and responsive to the multicultural student population. In the midst of all that change, Saint Paul University has faithfully maintained its official bilingual and bicultural character. There are many who intentionally choose Saint Paul University because of that uniqueness, especially those who are called to minister in both officially recognized languages either across Canada or anywhere in the world.

Although formation for Roman Catholic priesthood has always been integral to the mission of the founding College, it was not until 1937 that Saint Paul Seminary officially opened its doors. The historical context of the past 68 years is characterized by four distinct ages or eras, each of which has had its own particular vision of church and ministry. That vision has deeply marked both the content and process of ministry formation in each of the eras. As well as that vision has been the contextual lenses for pastoral practice in each of those ages.

The first age spanned from the Seminary's opening to the Second Vatican Council in the mid-1960s. For about 35 years, the Rule of Seminary life was to provide regularity, observance of its religious obligations, and an orderly Seminary life in accordance with the directives of the Holy See and Seminary discipline. This Rule not only shaped the formation community of that age, but also both reflected the prevailing vision of church and ministry, which was characterized by order, regularity and strict observance of religious obligations. This vision of church and ministry was the contextual lens for theological reflection and discerning appropriate pastoral practice for that time.

The second age was ushered in by the Second Vatican Council's burning desire for renewal, during the second half of the 1960s. This desire for change carried with it a vision of ministry that no longer fit the Rule of the first age. Given the profundity of change, the turmoil of the second age was inevitable. This turmoil was symbolic of what was happening at every level of church life. Not only was there a drastic drop in candidates for ordained ministry in seminaries across the country, there was a mass exodus from religious communities and presbyterial ministry. This radical decline was also experienced in the Sunday assemblies, and especially in francophone Quebec. Without the familiar framework in which members had forged their identity, many sensed a deep loss and disorientation. Many chose to abandon a way of life which had lost both its power over them and its capacity to speak to them at the core of their being. Saint Paul University Seminary was no exception to this radical decline. In this time of intense change, the Rule of the first age with its vision of church and ministry, no longer responded to the aspirations of the candidates nor the needs of the Canadian church.

The third age dawned in 1971, when the Rule of the Seminary was updated in the spirit of renewal desired by the Second Vatican Council. While traditional structures were preserved: spiritual direction, initiation to prayer, daily Eucharist and the Office, elements were added which fostered social and personal development. These elements are significant with respect to the emerging vision of church and ministry. Faith-sharing groups were formed; a Student Council was established to help create and promote dialogue between the formation team and the seminarians, committees of seminarians took on certain responsibilities in the community, and a more elaborate evaluation procedure was developed to involve the student self-evaluation and feedback. These were the main innovations enhancing the climate of mutual confidence. It was in this age that pastoral activities (field education) were intentionally designed to encourage students to remain in contact with the world during their theological studies and ministry formation process. A close look at this new Rule reveals that while regularity and order of the daily devotions are not dismissed, there was a move toward basing Seminary formation on principles of adult education.

The defining vision became co-responsibility and empowerment. There was an intentional move to provide a formation process in which seminarians had input into their overall programming, decisions and evaluation. This was the beginning of an understanding of formation as a dynamic and on-going process. This move was monumental not only in the delivery of the formation program within the Seminary but also with respect of the relations of the Seminary with the *outside* world. In this Rule of the third age, the vision of church and ministry were characterized by the movement from a child-like dependence on order, obligation and outer authority toward a more adult-like independent stance of co-responsibility and empowerment for both the ordained and the laity. And as with the first age, theological reflection and discernment of appropriate pastoral practice were shaped by that vision of church and ministry—a vision in which the church was becoming less triumphant and more dialogical with others outside its immediate boundaries.

The transition into fourth age began with the opening of the Centre for Ministry Formation in 1997. Like the Rule of the third age, this transition was also faithful to the renewal begun in the Second Vatican Council. As the number of candidates for ordained ministry diminished and the role of laity in the church increased, Saint Paul University had recognized the growing need for a ministry formation process for preparing lay pastoral associates for ecclesial ministry. Rather than provide a completely separate formation track for lay ministers, the University Seminary became an integral part of the Centre so that it could offer formation as one unit, yet each with its distinctive parts, for candidates for both lay and ordained ministries. The Centre opened its doors eight years ago, welcoming its first candidate for lay ministry, a woman soon to be followed by other women and men seeking a space for vocational discernment and preparation for ministry. As with all vital change, innovation and tradition are the defining marks of this transition. The Centre continues to build on the evolving story of bilingual ministry formation at Saint Paul University.

The mission of the Centre is marked by the call to discipleship and pastoral leadership as sharing in the mission of the People of God. Building on the values of co-responsibility and empowerment first named in the vision of third age, the Centre offers an integral formation process<sup>1</sup> in a community which identifies itself as a community of disciples. As a community of disciples, the Centre is a mentoring community in which new learning relationships emerge as its members accompany one another in their growth and attentiveness to the common good of the formation community. Holding together the many ways in which we are called to dependence, independence and interdependence in our relationships and pastoral practice, the Centre has expanded our understanding of co-responsibility for the students' personal formation to intentionally include their contribution to the well-being and formation of others.

Giving priority to ministry formation as pastoral leadership education calls for the developing of particular skills and competencies, as well as the shaping of the student's attitudes and identity as a collaborative, interdependent, integrated and transformative pastoral leader. This particular attitudinal profile and pastoral identity is rooted in a vision of church as communion—a vision in which the mission of Jesus Christ is shared by all the baptized in a multiplicity of charisms and ministries. These values are named and integrated into the learning goals and assessment of the students' overall formation process, including their supervised pastoral practice. The vision of church and ministry the first, second and even third ages no longer fits our current needs as church. This is a difficult concept for some candidates for

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<sup>1</sup> Integral formation includes human, pastoral, spiritual and intellectual development.

ministry to understand. Some lament what they experience as excessive demands on their own human, spiritual, pastoral and intellectual maturity.

As the Centre attempts to live out of a communion ecclesiology, we seek to move toward a more inclusive church which embraces a renewed understanding of pastoral leadership which is shared by all the baptized. Now, as persons of faith, we know that communion is never fully realized in this life, and that the call to transformation and to communion go hand in hand. Therefore, as we participate in Christ's mission, we participate in the process of transformation (conversion or change) to which all of creation is called. That call to freely engage in the on-going process of transformation is at the core of our vision of ministry and church. And as Mahatma Gandhi aptly reminds us, "we must become the change we want to see in the world." This means that Centre must work toward transforming its own ecclesial culture as a formation community in order to be agents of transformation for and with others. It is this vision of church and ministry which is the contextual lens for pastoral practice and theological reflection.

Ministry formation within the Centre's vision of church and ministry is characterized by what we call *significant changes*, which are clearly articulated in its mission statement—a mission statement which is an important part of the members' handbook. None of those changes have happened in a vacuum. The Centre's mission is shaped by a vision of church and ministry which has undergone *significant changes* since the Second Vatican Council in the mid-1960s. These *significant changes*<sup>2</sup> represent a vision of church which is becoming more and more inclusive<sup>3</sup>—a vision which is marked by unity-in-diversity, mutuality as well as an attentiveness to God's presence in our world. This vision is intentionally integrated into our ministry formation process. I will give you an example. One of the significant changes named in our mission statement is the movement from a monastic spirituality to a spirituality which is based on pastoral practice. In keeping with this vision, in one of our weekly faith-sharing group meetings, the group leader asked us to reflect on "how our spirituality is shaped by our pastoral practice." One of our candidates for ministry first responded by saying, "I would have preferred if you had asked: How is your pastoral practice shaped by your spirituality?" The first question: "How is your spirituality shaped by your pastoral practice?" is very different from the second: "How is your pastoral practice shaped by your spirituality?" The starting point for our reflection is the experience (the story) of the other, not our personal spirituality. Here we are invited to not only pay attention to God in others, but actually be open to be shaped and formed by how God reveals Godself in the other in our pastoral practice.

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<sup>2</sup> I refer to the vision as cited in the Centre's mission statement itself:

**Significant Changes**

- In meeting the challenges of being church—a church which emerges from Vatican II—significant shifts of perspective and emphasis occur. Some of these transitions for the Centre are moving from:
- A Seminary forming presbyters... to a Centre preparing for a variety of ministries.
- A monastic style of spiritual life... to a spiritual life based on pastoral practice.
- A vision of mission and ministry restricted to bishops, priests, and deacons... to a mission shared by all the baptized, in a multiplicity of charisms and ministries.
- An elitist view of ordained ministry... to a mutuality of ministries and solidarity in service. Men preparing for orders... to women and men preparing for various pastoral leadership roles.
- A cleric-lay axis... to a community-ministries axis.

<sup>3</sup> Inclusivity in the sense of gender, language, culture, theological expression and leaning, etc. Of course, the question of "legitimate diversity" comes to the fore here—a question with which we, as church, need to continue to struggle.

As field educators, we know that the focus on pastoral formation is not limited to the location of the internship in which the student is ministering. The Centre considers the formation community itself to be a critical locus for pastoral formation. The formation community is itself neither an experiment nor a laboratory, but is in itself a particular expression and an integral part of the universal church. In other words, the Centre identifies itself as an authentic faith community that struggles to live its call to participate in Christ's mission in its current socio-historical context. In my own leadership role in the Centre's ministry formation process, I have become clearer about the challenges and obstacles to living out the Centre's vision of moving toward a more inclusive church. I have come to appreciate that there is no simple way of engaging in those challenges. Change cannot be legislated. Neither coercion nor censure of exclusive behaviour serves long-term transformation, or deep structural change of attitudes and ministerial identity.

As I ponder some of the Centre's experiences and the members' behaviours, I am struck by the many complexities in our attempts to provide an integral formation process which gives equal value to the diversity of the ministries, *and* provides for the development of ministerial skills and identity which are specific to the ministry for which the student is preparing. For me, the question which begs to be asked is: How do we move towards a more inclusive church in which we practice mutuality and solidarity in the diverse forms of pastoral leadership and in which difference in ministry promotes unity rather than division? One way of engaging in this question is to look at the Centre's practice of ministry formation and pastoral leadership education as "praxis." I define praxis as practice which embodies its *telos*—its final purpose or vision.<sup>4</sup> In praxis, we are actually guided in our practice by becoming more and more conscious of the vision which is embodied in the practice. In other words, what we do, how and what we speak, to whom we intentionally choose to speak, and how we relate to one another inside and outside the formation community—all this matters with respect to moving toward our more inclusive vision of church and ministry. The goal of the Centre's praxis is to engender new realities by re-constructing pastoral values and objectives in order to respond to our current pastoral needs. As both women and men prepare for pastoral leadership, new ways of ministering and new forms of ministry are established and the ecclesial community has the capacity to be itself transformed.

As we engage in a variety of methodologies<sup>5</sup> to reflect on our pastoral practice, we have come to appreciate that the narrative process of story and reflecting is in itself a praxeological process which is essential to the discovery, construction, re-construction and growing consciousness of the Centre's vision of church and ministry. As with the experience in the faith-sharing group, it is in the telling our story, in reflecting on that story and re-thinking it in community in light of our vision, that transformation has already begun—transformation *in* the candidates for ministry as well as *in* the communities in which they are engaged. In this light, ministry formation is itself praxeological in that the vision and theology of ministry which are themselves undergoing significant changes, are found within the Centre's practice, leaving the vision itself open to critique and theological reflection.

Now I would not want to leave you with a picture of the Centre as utopia or having achieved the eschaton. Far from it. In fact, life can be messy at times; but like all of us here, we are on the journey. The very fact that the Centre's praxis is moving toward a more inclusive

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<sup>4</sup> Ray Anderson, *The Shape of Practical Theology: Empowering Ministry with Theological Praxis* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 49.

<sup>5</sup> For example: case studies, verbatims or structured conversations with supervisors and mentors.

church is a sign that the model of church found in the Seminary Rules of the First and Third age no longer fits our current realities. Yet, the best of those Rules should and do continue to have a hold on us. They are and need to be incorporated into our current praxis. However, the Centre does continue to embody built-in supports and behaviours which tend to maintain exclusive practices, one of which is clericalism. It is oft-times difficult if not impossible to transform those counter-praxes. For instance, the praxis of clericalism is well imbued with what some would call an ingeniously designed and historically rooted philosophical, theological and ecclesiological system; much of which stands as a contradiction to any attempts to moving toward a more inclusive church and thereby maintaining the status quo. Those same contradictions are embodied in varying degrees in the Centre's praxis.

The Centre is attentive to its responsibility to ponder deeply our ecclesiology and theology of ministry which is revealed in our praxis. In reflecting on the Centre's praxis, questions are raised as to how to enable transformation according to our mission and vision of church. Recognizing our accountability to all of God's people, one of critical questions are: How can the Centre's ministry formation process make a difference to the future life of the church in which our candidates for ministry will serve? Although my question is future-oriented, its answer needs to be rooted in our current praxis which enfolds our rich and developing history.

The Centre's vision of church and ministry is one of the contextual lenses through which we reflect on the students' pastoral practice in their theological field education placement. In this process of reflection, students have opportunities to intentionally discover, clarify and integrate that vision in their pastoral practice and on-going formation for pastoral leadership. The ultimate goal of that process is that all candidates for ministry may themselves become agents of transformation in the mission of Christ.

### **Cam Harder**

Rev. Dr. Cam Harder is Associate Professor of Systematic Theology and Director of Contextual Education at the Lutheran Theological Seminary in Saskatoon, SK. He has spent eleven years doing research with rural people and was a parish pastor for twelve years in town and country ministry. Cam regularly offers community workshops and seminary courses aimed at helping rural communities to regain some control of their future. In 2004-2005 he completed a sabbatical study (funded by the Wabash Foundation) of several dozen religious and secular institutions in Canada, the U.S., Britain and India that train seminarians and other community leaders for rural development. He is the author of *The Shame of Farm Bankruptcy: A Sociological and Theological Investigation of Its Effects on Rural Communities* unpublished thesis (Toronto: University of St. Michael's College, 1999) and has contributed chapters to *Writing Off the Rural West* and *Doing Ethics in a Pluralistic World*. He has written numerous articles for church and agricultural papers, including the "Moral Economy" column in the *Western Producer*.

## **How a Rural Context Affects the Shape of Field Education on the Prairies**

At our seminary in Saskatoon, SK, about 80% of our graduates are called into small rural parishes. As the communities around them depopulate, getting stripped of their services and institutions, the congregations tend to hunker down in a survival mode. They watch their young people leaving and not coming back. They see their schools and hospitals being shut down, regionalized. There is a kind of corporate grief that sets in. They are constantly having to say

good bye, to let go. It's like getting flesh-eating disease, watching your body parts being amputated, finger by finger, limb-by-limb. They often feel hopeless—trapped by fate on a down escalator that can only end in the dark hole of extinction. Some feel abandoned by God—as if God joined the exodus to the cities and left them behind. There is often a corporate sense of shame; the community feels wounded, weak, not quite publicly presentable anymore. It stifles their energy for mission and traps them under a blanket of communal depression.

These congregations need hope, renewed self-esteem, and a set of skills for rebuilding their communities. Our grads need specialized tools for understanding these rural contexts and for catalyzing change.

I've felt that our traditional field education hasn't really given either our rural congregations or our students what they've needed. In the past an intern was often a cheap way to supply a congregation that could no longer afford a full-time pastor. For the congregation the intern was both a visible step toward closure and an attempt to stave it off a little longer. For interns it was often a confusing, frustrating time of wrestling with what seemed to be unsolvable problems and a deadly inertia, with only an off-site supervisor for help.

Looking for some answers, I spent my sabbatical year traveling across Canada, the U.S. India and Great Britain, visiting seminaries, rural institutes and NGO's. I wanted to find training methods that would both equip our students for rural ministry and help to revitalize rural congregations in the process.

I can't say that I've found a magic solution. But I've found a tool that is very promising. I've used it fruitfully in a pilot project with one of my interns. The tool is community-based participatory research. You're probably familiar with its development out of the work of Paulo Friere. Friere was a Latin American educator. He saw that communities began to pull out of poverty and oppression when they changed the source of their self-image. Most of the time, communities came to know themselves through the eyes of educated elite. Much the way that women have come to see themselves through the eyes of men. The sources of knowledge, the textbooks, tend to be written by people who don't share the people's oppression and in fact often contribute to it. The knowledge they gain from such elite tends to reinforce their sense of themselves as a people without resources, reliant on others, helpless and hopeless.

Friere suggested that the job of a teacher is to help communities learn how to research themselves, to see themselves through their own eyes.

This is how it worked in my pilot project. A parish consisting of 4 small rural churches contacted us for help with a congregational survey. They wanted to know where their members had all gone and was there any chance of getting them back. I said that I would train a student to work with them. But I asked if they would take the student on as an intern. That way the student could live with them and really get to know them. And the student could also help them learn how to gather that information for themselves. They agreed and we worked together to raise funding for the internship.

Of the interns that volunteered we purposely chose one who was an urbanite, with no experience in rural life or ministry. I gave the intern a reading course in research methods before we began. It mostly focused on methods of interviewing and processing data from interviews. As I'm doing this again now, I'm focusing much more on training the intern in group facilitation methods—especially appreciative inquiry and asset-mapping—and action planning—how to equip leaders to take what they learn about themselves and use it to bring healthy change.

The intern worked with a group of parish leaders to set up a series of interviews. These were intended to help sharpen the focus of the study. There was an underlying anxiety among the

members that the motive out of which congregational leaders were undertaking this study was to dredge up reasons for closing down the churches. People were interviewed at the center and the margins of the congregations and their responses collated by the parish councils. What came out of those interviews were lots of expressions of frustration. Young people were being excluded. Older people felt that worship was not connected to their economic realities. There was a sense of lost purpose.

The self-perception that emerged was pretty negative. It was obvious that the congregations saw themselves as problem places—problems with youth, problems with attendance, problems with commitment

So the intern organized a series of focus groups within each of the congregations and instead of asking “what’s wrong?” he asked “what’s right?” The questions come out of the work of David Cooperrider. They’re called “appreciative inquiry.” Cooperrider’s assumption is that organizations change in the direction of their most frequently asked questions. Positive questions create positive change. Negative questions generate blaming and discouragement.

So the intern asked the focus group questions like these: “What has been the highlight of your experience with this congregation? What are some of the things we do well? What have we done in the past that has really worked with youth? What do people really turn out for and why? What are 3 wishes that we have for this congregation?”

It was amazing to see the energy that developed in that parish. There was a dramatic rise in self-esteem as they listened to each other’s stories and discovered that they did some things very well. It was a way of removing shame and restoring honour to the congregations.

The intern worked with a group to collate responses. This time inter-congregational focus groups were held. The people were asked “what resources do you have personally that we could bring to our future together?” The resources they were told to look for included personal experience, skills, hobbies, personality traits, congregational groups, things people owned, community connections, and so on.

Out of those gatherings came a growing sense that this was not a poor, dying parish but one that was rich in history, people and resources. The job was to pull them together in creative ways. Essentially, the intern used a tool called “asset-mapping.” Luther Snow has a good book just out on this for congregations from the Alban Institute. Called “The Power of Asset-Mapping: How Your Congregation Can Act on Its Gifts.”

The internship finished while the parish was developing action plans. But the people had the process well in hand, and knew how to go back and repeat steps if they needed to. And they have moved forward in ministry with new vitality.

In the semester following internship it has been delightful to see the intern’s growth in maturity and perceptiveness. In class this urbanite constantly asks questions that provoke us to think about things from a rural perspective. And his insight into congregational dynamics is keener than most. Which definitely wasn’t the case before internship.

I believe that using community participatory research projects as part of our field ed has several advantages:

First, it teaches students that the source of expert knowledge is primarily in the people, not in the seminary library. They learn to come to their context with a listening, inquisitive stance, not with a bunch of answers.

Second, it gives students a set of tools with which they can enter a variety of contexts and discover the unique characteristics of each one. They don’t have to depend on broad generalizations.

Third, it teaches students how to be equippers rather than expert performers.

Fourth, it helps congregations become learning communities. Instead of depending on the pastor to tell them who they are, the student gives them the same tools he or she was given—so they can research themselves and their community. And instead of extracting information from a community, as research projects often do, it leaves the community richer, more aware of its own gifts, better equipped to understand itself.

Finally, it helps to raise the hope, self-esteem and faith of rural congregations. They discover that they have unexpected resources, that God is still at work in their midst, that the future isn't a black hole.

There are challenges, however. Projects have to be shaped to the intern's capabilities. The project we began with was probably too large and should have been trimmed to fit better within a year's internship. Also supervisors need to be on board with the theory and process of community participatory research. We help them do this in a team-building retreat just before internship begins. If a supervisor simply wants an intern to learn how to do things the way their congregation does them, there may be some friction. Also, although it is oriented toward positive responses, this sort of research may generate feedback about the supervisor's ministry with which he or she may not be too comfortable. The intern must be careful not to get involved in evaluations of the supervisor's ministry with congregational members.

What I appreciate about this training tool is that it fits well with several key theological convictions that are native to rural communities.

One is that knowing is a matter of relationships, not data transfer. In rural communities information is always weighed according to one's relationship with the informant. How much can I trust what this person says? Why are they telling it to me? What's safe to talk about with this person, what's not? Who else are they connected to that may be the source of their information? And so on? To *know* anything in rural communities, one must know people, face to face.

That's very much the way that "knowing" is understood in the Bible. We read that Adam *knew* Eve and she bore a son. I'm pretty sure that Adam's knowing had nothing to do with reading Eve's curriculum vitae. It was a relational knowing. And a very fleshly knowing.

This brings us to the matter of knowing God. At the bottom of all our seminary training is this hope that somehow our students will meet God. That's the meaning of "theology" right? The study of God. But looking at our curricula students might easily get the idea that to know God is to know texts. That we know God by studying God's curriculum vitae, so to speak. Yet that very curriculum vitae tells us that God is incarnate—that to meet God we have to get to know real people. That's the doctrine of the incarnation.

The doctrinal descriptions in our dogmatics texts are really meant to *point us* to the meeting place with God. They show us where others have found God, they give us some idea of what we might expect, though surprises are common. They function as God's curriculum vitae or as the *syllabi* for our theology course. But they are not the course itself. The real study of God, the knowing God, happens in the community.

And that's the second theological conviction inherent to rural communities. You can never know a person in isolation from others. Rural people's self-image is constructed out of relationships. They may live with the same people their whole lives and come to see themselves and others' through the community's eyes. That's why shame is such a powerful dynamic. To lose the respect of the community is to become invisible—to lose oneself. And to gain their respect, to gain honour, is to find oneself.

The Bible tells us that God's self is also determined in community. Our doctrine of the trinity points to the experience of the early church. At the Jordan they came to know Jesus through the Father's eyes: "this is my beloved son." In Jesus' ministry of healing and teaching they came to know the Father as one who heals and restores and accepts. Through the Father and Son they received the gift of the Spirit who makes all things new. They discovered that God *is* community.

And that brings me to the third and last theological conviction of our rural communities—that it is building community, not growing large congregations that is the church's mission in rural communities. It reflects the vision in Revelation—that in the end, when all is said and done, the point of salvation is that all the nations live together, with the natural world, in a beautiful, dynamic community. Salvation, forgiveness of sins, the sacraments, even the Church are not ends in themselves, but the Church's gift to the world to help build a preview of that community. God's mission in the world is to reproduce that divine communal life.

I discovered in our internship project that the great thing about community participatory research is that whether or not some earth-shaking action plan comes out of it, the very doing of the research—the getting to know each other—builds community. That's what it's all about—from a rural point of view anyway.

### **Joan Wyatt**

Joan Wyatt experienced the need to understand culture and context as a nurse in pediatrics, psychiatry and obstetrics in Toronto, New York, Edinburgh and northern Alberta. Her observations were further challenged in ministry, first from the privileged perspective as the spouse of a minister in rural and small towns in both Alberta and Ontario and then on her own as an ordained person in the United Church of Canada in a multi cultural context in Toronto. Joan is currently Assistant Professor of Pastoral Theology and Theological Field Education at Vancouver School of Theology, a multi denominational school that prepares students for lay and ordered ministry both in a residential program in Vancouver and through the Native Ministries Program by extension in North America and Hawaii. VST also offers graduate programs in theology and spirituality. Observing and reading the dynamic of ever-changing individual and communal living texts is an important aspect of Joan's teaching and her own understanding of her intellectual disciplines.

## **The Impact of Context on Theological Field Education**

### **Toronto to Vancouver**

Six years ago, after ten years in Ministry in a Toronto congregation I arrived in Vancouver. This is an exquisite city on Canada's west coast where the mountains meet the sea and eagles nest in the towering firs. On arrival I was repeatedly asked, how will you make the cultural shift to British Columbia? Good Question. So, as teachers are wont to do, I designed my first year course so that the students and I could learn what I thought that we needed to know.

### **Three Cultural Contexts Immediately Came to Mind.**

We started with First Nations peoples. Vancouver School of Theology (VST) sits on land that traditionally belongs to the Musqueam Nation. The legacy of Indian Residential Schools is, I think, the most pressing challenge before Canadian churches today. First Nations' land claims generate an ongoing political debate in British Columbia. Bishop Desmond Tutu's words are burned into my consciousness from 1990 when, during the Mohawk standoff over land use in

Quebec, he addressed the General Council of The United Church of Canada. Tutu told us that Canada's system of Indian reserves had provided the pattern to construct apartheid in South Africa.

Second, we turned our attention to the history and the stories of Chinese and Japanese Canadians. I knew from elementary school history that Chinese people helped to build the railways that connected Canada from shore to shore and that they were then subjected to head tax and curfews. I knew of the disenfranchisement of land and possessions and internment of Japanese Canadians during WWII. But what has happened since? And what about the newer Korean immigrants? VST has many Korean students.

Third, we explored Vancouver's notorious Downtown Eastside. This area, contained in roughly six city blocks, has no real counterpart in any other Canadian city. It is heavily populated by sex trade workers, pimps, johns, drug addicts and dealers. It is cheek by jowl with Chinatown. Most waves of immigration to Canada's West coast entered adjacent to this location. Some from each group were unable to move on and stayed. Others have gravitated here to fulfill needs not so easily met in other areas of the city. The high proportion of First Nations people in this unique community has prompted some to quip that the Downtown Eastside is one of Canada's largest Indian Reserves.

### **Why Begin with These Contexts**

I observed in Toronto that the Ecumenical Forum that prepared mission personnel for careful observation, analysis and respect overseas seemed to achieve good outcomes. By comparison, I observed that seminary graduates in Canada frequently seemed unable to understand and appreciate Canadian congregations before they attempted to lead them off in some uncharted direction. It occurred to me that learning about context might be easier if the context was not too similar to one's own.

Thus, the first year course in Pastoral Theology and Theological Field Education, a course required for all MDiv and MA students at VST, looks at First Nations, Three Asian Communities and the Downtown Eastside. Through a highly experiential process, students begin to learn to do contextual analysis and in the process to reflect on themselves and their peers as living texts.

### **What Do I Mean by Living Texts?**

I begin with the assumption that there is no absolute objective truth and that there is no single identity to be discovered. Living texts of self, other and community are, despite their distinctiveness, in a constant process of construction, deconstruction and reconstruction, of life, death and rising to new forms. The concept of constructed identity opens space for transformation to be expected and regarded as a norm rather than only a source of conflict and resistance. The relationship between and among individuals and communities creates context and the conditions for this ever dynamic process of change. Access to any particular living text, individual or communal, can be gained by observation across a spectrum of such things as ritual, language, the arts, and how the history of the text has been constructed. Such access is provisional since the text is not static but dynamic.

### **Why These Texts?**

I chose the living texts in Vancouver of First Nations, Asian and Downtown Eastside because they are so different from the dominant culture of our school. I chose them so that voices

that might be silent will speak first. I chose them because they are vital, distinct threads in Vancouver's fabric.<sup>6</sup> I chose them because dramatic encounters will offer students an opportunity, to begin the spiritual discipline of reading, and re-reading, ever-changing living texts, and so will enhance their capacity for openness to difference, to change and to God.

I propose that the capacity to read a living text can be learned and that the skills are transferable to reading different texts. The ability to read the living texts of self, other, and community each requires curiosity, respectful inquiry, openness to difference and to disciplined reflection.

### **Students Responses to the Course**

Students are often deeply disturbed by what they encounter in this course. Reactions are varied some are angry that they have had to cope with such difficult material; some want to hear no more; some to fix things; some to assign blame to someone or something; some want to vent and rant and cry their outrage at such wrong. These are real experiences about real lives and real contexts. They are also real moments for learning.

A frequent response to this course is that the experiences have been revelatory and transformative. These include:

- two young women who asked me “did you send us to the Downtown Eastside so that we would never be the same again?”
- a young Taiwanese student who asked “can I have a placement in the Downtown Eastside? I need to overcome my fear of people who are so different from me”
- a sixty year old First Nations woman from a remote village said,, “I had no idea that people would want to listen to what I had to say.” Francis brought her context into our classroom. She said where she expected to feel silenced and insecure, suddenly her context was the curriculum and she and her people were the experts. To see her peers crying at stories from residential schools made her feel that she was not so alone in her grief and the journey to seek healing
- a Japanese graduate student related her research on so-called Korean “Comfort Women” abducted by the Japanese military and used as sexual slaves during WWII; Four young Korean men in the class were moved to hear such compassion and regret from someone who in their eyes is part of the oppressive nation that harmed in one case, a grandmother, in another an aunt.

### **Some Observations, Conclusions and Further Work in Process:**

The goals of this course are somewhat subversive. Students are already dislocated through the experiences of a first semester. Careful educational process is required to allow time and space to process the emotional content of this course. In the second semester, students undertake a similar discipline of reading context in a supervised site, in most cases, a parish or congregation. One of the questions posed is how do the contexts that we studied in the first term feature in this new context? Can we see evidence in the membership, in liturgy, music, outreach, prayers, the budget? What is the nature of the relationship between these contexts? What does this mean theologically and how does it connect with how you see the gospel? Since on- site Field Educators and lay people engage in the research that the students conduct, the question, about what may be missing, functions as a challenge to the site as well as the student.

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<sup>6</sup>Other contexts could have been chosen. The East Indian community is an important aspect of Vancouver's cultural fabric which is addressed at VST through a course in World Religions.

Supervised Field Education is a required course for all three years of the MDiv ordination track at VST. The engagement in the first year begins a process of mutual reflection that continues in second and third year through the formalized structures of supervision and Ministry Reflection groups. We have begun this year to experiment with Societal Ministry placements that do the classroom work through other theological disciplines. Currently this is integrated with a Spirituality Course taught by Sallie McFague, as well as a course in Revelation and one in Amos. This is hopeful step toward integrating other theological faculty into praxis teaching. So after six years, thanks to students, gracious hosts, fascinating guests and wonderful field trips, I have learned a lot about this exquisitely beautiful city. The experiences have uncovered a complexity that includes stories and lives of fretful desperation, of harmful public policies and both extreme loss and remarkable triumph and courage. Working and teaching in Vancouver gives me passion to continue to reflect on and to refine contextual learning. It also fuels my passion and hope that living texts, even marred by trauma, can rise to creative life made new. And as educators, we, in the companionship of Christ, can be part of the adventure.

I had this experience myself as a student nurse at Sick Children's Hospital in the early 1960s. An instructor from Hong Kong taught us how important it was to read the living text of our patients and their families. Sick Kids was very multi-cultural. Patients and staff came from all over the world. Encounter with a vulnerable child whose culture and language is different from one's own evokes a multitude of feelings. These encounters, under Ms. Chen's tutelage were valuable teachable moments. She helped us to see that we had been taught to see the world in a particular way and that it might not be the only way. She expanded our curiosity and openness to difference and, I think, our capacity for compassion for all of our patients.

### **Constructing a First Year Theological Field Education (TFE) Course at VST**

From reading course descriptions and meeting with the curriculum committee I noted that VST was committed to TFE and had an expectation that it played a key role in integrating theoretical learning from other disciplines. I could see that students received good teaching in hermeneutics. In the required orientation to the school they would learn how to identify power imbalances and privileges related to culture, gender and sexual orientation. They would be informed of VST's stated expectations to ensure that minority voices are respected and protected. But there was little experiential opportunity to enliven these theories. Students were serving primarily in congregational or parish sites.

Using the three areas as broad examples of the larger landscape of Vancouver I designed the first semester of a full year course required for all MDiv students. The first semester is now also required for MA students. In addition to an examination of the three discrete areas I have added sections on addictions and gay, lesbian and bi-sexuality.

The process in each section requires exposure to the history, culture and arts of each particular area under scrutiny. Students are required to

- read assigned novels, Joy Kawgawa's, *Obasan*,
- watch videos and films on things like residential schools and *Traffic*
- visit Arts and Cultural Centres, like UBC's Museum of Anthropology and Nitobe Gardens
- visit social Service Agencies
- spend a plunge day in the DTES
- visit worship specific to the cultures

In addition to class visits there are class presentations from First Nations students and from faculty and staff. These include Wendy Fletcher, Dean at VST sharing her research on residential schools, Gerald Hobbs, Professor of History who acts as a consultant for First Nations land claims, Martin Brokenleg, director of Native Ministries and professor of Native Theology who presents on both First Nations histories, rituals and experiences, as well as on addictions. I now co-teach this course with Alan Lai, who takes the lead in the section on Asian cultures in Vancouver. The inclusion of guests and the variety of visits helps to model that ministry requires a capacity to be highly relational, curious, varied and connected. Who is teacher and who is learner, what and how we learn is challenged in this course.

The three hour weekly class time includes small peer discussion groups that provide opportunity to process the content of the course. A lectionary passage is assigned as reading each week and class opens with worship related to the passage and the topic of the day. Students keep a weekly journal in which assigned questions direct them to reflect on their own responses and help in sharing in the small groups and in writing the three reflection papers required at the end of each section of the course.

### **Second Semester of the Course**

Students are placed by the first Sunday of Advent in sites, for MDiv students primarily, but not exclusively, in congregations or parishes. For MA students who elect the course in a site appropriate for their focus of study. In this semester students:

- compile a thick description on their assigned supervised sites
- write two papers on their observations and research, one an historical and sociological account and analysis and two a theological and biblical analysis; in each case students are required to consider how the faith community corresponds to their own expectations and theological /biblical commitments
- must include in their reflections how the issues and contexts examined in the first semester feature in these faith communities or agencies; Are they reflected in membership, liturgy, music, outreach, budget? What does this mean theologically/ how does it connect with how you see the gospel?

I propose that the capacity to read a living text can be learned and that the skills are transferable between living texts. The ability to read the living texts of self, other, and community each require curiosity, respectful inquiry, openness to difference and disciplined reflection.

Constructed identity is mostly unconscious and unreflected. By eschewing any idea that true identity, personal or communal, is fixed, opens space for transformation to be expected and regarded as a norm rather than a source of conflict and resistance.

### **Plenary Table Group Discussion**

- Who are you and where are you from? (school, area of Canada, regional distinctions)
- How does context affect the way you shape curriculum?
- How do you pay attention to context in your program?