"Learning from the Faith Story of the Community:
The Role of Theological Reflection in DMIN Projects"

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This paper proposes a narrative approach to theological reflection that better suits both the nature of the D.Min. degree as a professional degree in the practice of ministry and the current reality in most parishes that the faith community now consists of members who do not originate from a single theological tradition or single social background but reflect instead the contemporary mobility between communities and denominational traditions. The role of theological reflection assumed in this paper is one that enables the student ministry researcher/leader to better understand the nature of the practicing faith community where she participates.

The realities of postmodernity and the accompanying paradigmatic changes now challenge communities of faith. Out of our conviction that the reality experienced by contemporary people is intentional, relational, and storied, we recognize that a new pastoral narrative/theological hermeneutic and research approach is needed that departs from the research outlook and worldview of the modern era. This fresh approach engages the postmodern realities, including the conviction that all research methodological traditions are merely competing stories which intersect with many others that affect a given ministry in a given place and time. Believing that all theology is descriptive theology and that only contextually grounded theological statements are reliable guides for the practitioner, this paper crafts a postmodern multi-sensual narrative hermeneutic which integrates narrative biblical theology (Frei and Barnes) with narrative family therapy methodology (Freedman and Combs, Epston). In so doing, we hope to provide a procedural map for studying and reflecting upon the multiple, intersecting stories surrounding a narrative of concern in ministry. Our map is

drawn as an interpretive narrative matrix in which reside the personal and faith stories of the researcher, the intersecting stories of the faith community's praxis, their religious traditions, and research stories garnered from readings, found documents, contextual study (demographics, culture, other social science research, history, etc.) and the study of symbol, ritual, and artifacts.

A Brief History of the Doctor of Ministry Thesis

A basic primer for D.Min. project-theses has been a book by Myers entitled *Research in Ministry: A Primer for the Doctor of Ministry Program*.[1] However, what was once at the breaking edge of the culture has now become submerged in newer developments. The D.Min. has in a sense now evolved beyond the model Myers' pioneer work crystallized, a view of the Doctor of Ministry degree that was formulated in what we now call "old paradigm" thinking—intellectual thinking that was formed and shaped by a world view now known as Modernism. Modernism as the pervasive mode and approach to sociology, science, and theology peaked perhaps in the 1950's and 60's, but true to form from previous eras, theological studies often are the last bastions of old paradigm thinking. Scientists and sociologists have already moved beyond the reductionism of modernity. Generally, Modernism focused on discovering cause and effect and examining component pieces—like a child taking apart toys in "exploratory engineering." Theological studies may yet be engaged in such activity. Thus, the impact and synergy of newer insights from cognate fields may go unnoticed in our sphere of interest for some time.

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1. William Myers, *Research in Ministry a Primer for the Doctor of Ministry Program*, Studies in Ministry and Parish Life (Chicago, Ill.: Exploration Press, 2000).

Yet, the identity of the D.Min. degree has evolved. It has a story that continues to shape the degree's embodiment in a variety of educational institutions. Created as a way to promote increasing competency and excellence in the practice of ministry, or as the ultimate credential in continuing education programs, or as a means to satisfy ecclesial demand for doctoral status, the degree has often had the academic Ph.D. as its model. The D.Min., however, is *not* a "mini Ph.D." A Ph.D. focuses on the academic study of a theoretical problem or intellectual tradition in a "pure" sense, with no immediate thought of applying this knowledge to a particular situation. The D.Min. degree and project-thesis is *not* a full-blown applied research project. While some D.Min. projects have modeled themselves after case study and clinical analytical models, D.Min. students are not expected to be experts in sociological or psychological research. For this reason the D.Min. paper has sometimes been relegated to a "junior" status in the academic community—neither academically sophisticated, nor methodologically rigorous.

Further, the Ph.D. dissertation is envisioned as a broadening of knowledge on a given subject without emphasis on its practical ramifications. In contrast to this, the D.Min. thesis not only broadens knowledge of the ministry subject, but also reflects upon its applied practice.

So, if it is *not* a dissertation, and it is *not* a research paper, then what is it? William Myers has stated that "each author seeks to reflect critically on some facet of ministry and to communicate her/his reflections to her/his professional colleagues."[2] This has essentially been the defining criterion for evaluating D.Min. work for the past few decades. But notice its implicit focus: the D.Min. student is to be the expert evaluating and communicating to like experts in a professional field.

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2. Myers, *Research in Ministry a Primer for the Doctor of Ministry Program*, xv.

At the Drew University Theological School we have made a modification to this implicit focus for quite some time. At Drew, since 1998, the student is expected to employ a lay-advisory team whose job is to inform, advise, and participate in the project. Likewise, the ministerial context (faith community) of the student is not simply the data field for study, but is expected to participate in the project. In other words, students are not simply doing critical reflection, but are engaged in ministry. The communication of reflections is not the goal of the paper. Mentoring, modeling, or motivating similar ministry changes and challenges in other ministry settings, not just to "professional colleagues," is the desired result of one's work.

Negatively, it (the project-thesis) is not an academic exercise; it is pursued within the context of ministry. It is not a research paper or case study, although it may inform ministry practice. It is not a "professional paper" to discuss implications of self-discovery to other professionals. Positively, it is a theological reflection and description of ministerial practice that represents the synergistic dialogue between various contexts of all those impacted by the process: social and cultural contexts; biblical, theological and denominational contexts; and personal contexts.

A New Approach

This paper suggests a new approach that highlights the role of theological reflection in D. Min. projects and seeks to enable D.Min. students to employ what are often strengths in pastoral work—the ability to engage in story and the network of relationships with their ministry setting. This approach removes the embedded assumption in modern research that "hard data" are to be prioritized over "anecdotal data." This does not mean one ignores the scientific data. For example a test that indicates obesity or high blood pressure is not disregarded simply because the

individual "feels good." In fact such data can and should be used to "thicken" and challenge the story. Yet that "hard data" is not the only component of self-identity: a person is not the sum of hard data and their self-reports are not the only basis of evaluation. It also recognizes that in work with persons, the components of identity formation are not necessarily consistently held.   People and groups will often hold a portrait of their own self that cannot be sustained when viewed from other perspectives which include "hard data." This picture of their identity can be either over or under-inflated, and often both at the same time. Their notion of the "what is" can be based on false assumptions of the past and/or self-limited projections of the future.

The new approach being introduced is a process by which to uncover the present in its "grasped" state by gathering many data stories about a given ministry context. These stories are not just derived from anecdotal ethnographic listening, but include many research methods. The multiplicity of perspective gained from such a framework will enable the appreciation and apprehension of meaning and relationship patterns within the context and their connection to the larger human story and within the setting in the story of God's interaction with creation.

Identity and Theological Reflection

We are, in a real sense, our stories. Who we are, what we think, and how we act are all shaped by the many large and small stories that make up the discourse embedded in our multi-sensory social experience. It is this postmodern understanding of identity and reality that has prompted this new way of thinking about doing research in faith communities today, particularly through a Doctor of Ministry program. It is our belief that, in order for faith communities to define themselves and to know what to do in ministry, they must first understand the multiple stories which intersect with a given ministry situation in their specific context.

Perceptions

We tell stories. Telling stories, we use words, metaphors, and motifs, etc.; we conceptualize these into abstractions. Community is the locus of meaning in the postmodern sense. It provides the context of experience, which is the framework that interprets.

The notion of the power of language and story is pervasive. The February 2003 issue of *Prevention* magazine contained one of the most concise definitions of this power that we have seen. In a sidebar entitled *The Power of Language and Stories* was found the following:

> We don't describe the world we see; we see the world we describe. Language has the power to alter perception. We think in words. These words have the power to limit us or to set us free; they can frighten us or evoke courage. Similarly, the stories we tell ourselves about our own life eventually become our life. We can tell healthy stories or horror stories. The choice is ours.[3]

Further, communal identity is about connecting around shared observation and experience, the D. Min. student should keep in mind that functional meanings discovered in the relatedness of all things, including human relationships, are organized and communicated in story form. "To be human is above all to have a

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3. "The Power of Language and Stories," *Prevention* 55 (February 2003): 139*Prevention.*Emmaus, Pa.: Rodale Press, 2003.

story."[4] This statement relates the way that many narrative theologians describe a general theory of human experience.

However, the starting point for these theologians is the "scriptural story" rather than a theory of narrative, and an understanding that all theology is narrative theology. Paul Ricoeur states that narrative renders experience significant and humanly meaningful.[5] The narrative configures the multiplicity, discordance and succession of experience into story. Otherwise experience is just "one damn thing after another."[6] Narrative is a configurative coalescence of one story out of many. It distinguishes character, action and circumstance so that one can decide whether an occurrence is an incident or an event, has intention or was accidental.[7] It creates or demonstrates *kairos* out of *chronos*—a sense of being of or in time.

Re-imagining the process of configuration can change the future that is intended or directed from a recounted narrative. A story intends a future. It contains recognition of what has happened and possibility of what is to come. While history is supposedly aimed at the past, narrative is aimed at a tradition. Narrative's aim is to express

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4. Hans W. Frei, William C. Placher, and George. Hunsinger, *Theology and Narrative Selected Essays*, ed. William C. Placher (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 208.

5. Paul. Ricœr, *Time and Narrative* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 3.

6. To recontextualize Elbert Hubbard's quote somewhat: "Life is just one damned thing after another." Elbert Hubbard (1856–1915), U.S. author. *Elbert Hubbard, The Philistine* (East Aurora, N.Y.: The Society, 1909).

7. "Whiteheadian postmodernism expresses the consequences of a realism that is reconstructed in terms of the priority of events over things or substances. It is quite consistent that deconstructive postmodernism peels the onion. It is equally consistent that Whiteheadian postmodernism seeks insights into the inexhaustible reality of the plenum of events, wherever those insights can be found." John Jr. Cobb, "Two Types of Postmodernism: Deconstruction and Process," *Theology Today* 47, no. 2 (July 1990): 158*Theology Today*Ephrata, Pa.: Science Press, 1990. Cobb, "Two Types of Postmodernism: Deconstruction and Process," 158.

meaning (myth-making—gathering meaning into a story that organizes and expresses part of a tradition and its practices) and to address the presently held order (parable-telling—comparing things from the spiritual realm to things in ordinary life for a teaching purpose). There is no knowing in a neutral fashion. Story, not past, renders identity. To be baptized is not indoctrination, but to be absorbed into the story of the Tradition.

But how does one assess whether or not the signified new narrative is an appropriate thing? Postmodern thinkers see all reality, including personal identity, as always "under construction"—a social construction of reality—and personal identity is seen therefore as a fluid composite of a number of "subject positions" the person occupies in the social order. People assume a varied number of identities, each contingent upon a position. Each position engages the person in a particular social discourse, or conversation (narrative) laden with values, norms, and power alignments. Discourses are organized ways of behaving that provide frameworks for making sense of the world. Personal power is dependent upon one's position in the discourse. These conversations shape a life story.

Reality is intentional, relational and storied. Yet, how does one assess the "realness" or "rightness" of a story that is held as normative? Tied up in the answer to this question is the notion of discernment. That is, we are not suggesting that we apply a standard of functionality to a story and *measure* it against such a rule. Such a measuring might impose structure. Discernment, rather, is a process, a participatory process, wherein one actively engages the story to sense its fit for "a healthy lifestyle" or "a preferred future." By discerning and not measuring we hope to avoid the language of pathology: a language in which difference is labeled "wrongness."

For example, I tore cartilage in my knee playing soccer as a "mature" adult. The orthopedic surgeon who treated my condition wrote a note to my family physician stating that, because of the condition of my knees, my soccer career was over and that I should pursue alternate activities. He had treated the condition. My family physician, knowing more of my background, history, interests and more general health, gave different advice. He noted that the health benefits derived from pursuing a recreation that I enjoyed outweighed the conservative position of ending the activity, *for me*. He, of course, added other admonitions: including better conditioning, strengthening the surrounding muscles, and being aware that if there were continued pain after rehabilitation that would truly be sign that I couldn't continue. He made this assessment based on the fact that benefits to my health outweighed the standard treatment. I continued to play soccer for another 10 years.

In the measuring model, exemplified by the stance of the orthopedic surgeon described above, any difference from a presumed standard would indicate divergence from the "truth." For example, science matches theory against observation. When there is congruence, one pre-supposes that the theory is "true" because it matches observed "reality." When there remain inconsistencies, either the theory is presumed false, or the observations are judged to be flawed. There is pathology present. That is to say, observation renders the theory abnormal, or untrue, since it is deemed outside of what is a commonly accepted standard.

But in the postmodern context that method is itself problematic. Scientific theory is, in the postmodern context, really just a story and observations are story-laden to begin with. There is no objective matching to reality, to the way things "really are." How can there be a true, overarching story when there are only competing stories? We can only match stories against one another. Political power may influence which of the competing story dominates, or the stories may remain isolated in their particularities.

Hence, instead of measuring, we need to discern. We look for, but do not always find, the elegant story that simplifies understanding and incorporates difference and diversity. In mathematics one seeks constantly to find the "elegant solution," one which is more than simply a correct solution. It is a solution that is elegant in its frugality, its ingenious approach, and in its architecture.[8] The calculus problem solution tells a complex and elegant story in its elegant solution. It weaves together a strand from an immense number of possibilities. In applying this concept to narrative research, I define the term elegant story as one which assembles a focus to multi-stranded stories of experiences that lack collective consensus. In common parlance the use of elegant story is often coupled with adjectives such as simple, stylish, engaging. One speaks of a "simple and **elegant story"** or an "**elegant story** stylishly told" or an "**elegant story**, engagingly told." Elegant story implies the idea of less-is-heartbreakingly-more in evoking impact. It may be that it is a narrative that has a closer correlation with coherent structure and identity than an emplotment of causal explanation. The elegant story is the salient story that stands out from the rest by its elegance as defined above yet contains most of the other stories at the same time. The elegant story can be a telling elaboration of the context. It fits together convincingly the many perspectives.[9] This is accomplished, however, not in an absolute sense but a contextual sense.[10]

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[8] Ursala M. Franklin, "Preface," in *Towards Gender Equity in Mathematics Education an ICMI Study*, ed. G. Hanna, New ICMI Studies Series (Dordrecht Boston, Mass: Kluwer Academic, 1996), xi.

[9] Discussing the current relevance of theory Robert W. Preucel and Ian Hodder state: "Rather than testing theory against data, we can talk of "fitting" theory and data to each other. The process is one of working between part and whole, until as much of the data as possible has been fitted together." Robert W. Preucel and Ian Hodder, *Contemporary Archaeology in Theory: A Reader*, ed. Robert W. Preucel, Social Archaeology (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1996), 10. Elegant story fits together the disparate bits of narrative and data in this manner.

[10] David Jones has brought to mind the competing stories of Sherman's *March to the Sea*. [personal email] The Northern and Southern perspectives would hold vastly different interpretative stories around the event. Neither of these could resolve into a single elegant story that combined both contexts. Elegant stories are not universals but contextually held. Only in terms of an even larger context of perhaps could

Instead of identifying pathologies we seek to discern the directions of harmony and function. We seek to uncover "realness" and "rightness." But how?

The concepts of realness and rightness are themselves the product of consensual social recognition and the socialization process. They reflect congruence with preferred conditions of being. Yet we can proceed to discern in the following suggested ways. These are not ways to discern, but questions to ask when attempting to practice discernment:

1. Is there a "plain sense" or a "coded sense" to the story?
2. Is the meaning intuitively self-apparent/transparent or must it be interpreted?
3. Is the interpretation based in socialization or intuition?

Plain sense is not the same as literal sense. Plain sense reflects historic usage and common understanding of wider community. For example, "And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell" (Matthew 5:30). The literal sense requires physical violence and disfigurement, the plain sense understands the apparent metaphor. The more broad the group is that shares the "common sense" of the story the more plain the sense is. A coded story is one that needs an interpretative key to be given as esoteric teaching, the inside joke as opposed to the pangenic aphorism.

We thus begin our theological reflection with a sense that in Judeo-Christian tradition, truth has never been a matter of matching stories against reality. One begins

an elegant story include this event, one that needs include the larger story of faith, repentance, reconciliation, and the grace of God.

with the story that is given to us. It is "revealed reality." In the Christian church, as G. Loughlin puts it, "a life-story . . . comes first,"[11] namely, the story of Jesus Christ. Our concepts of "realness" and "rightness" in this vein assume also a potential of faithfulness. They include a prominence of love, justice and care of creation. A "real" story has a transparency that the transcendent, that which transcends "what is" to "what is preferred to be," can be seen through it. It intends a future.

A New Approach to Ministry in a Postmodern Context

What is being suggested in this paper is a new approach to effective ministry and creative D.Min. projects in the postmodern context. It includes, though it does not begin with, the issues of how that context is different than those that precede or proceed from the "what is" by means of theologically reflecting on the faith story of the community. What is hoped is that this approach will make available to the leader/researcher a window into reality. We live in a structure that we are or are not comfortable with, a building that is partly imposed upon us and partly created by us. It is a dynamic structure that unfolds, evolves, changes. It is partly comprised of our words and actions and partly changes our neural pathways. It incorporates the definitive notion that our self, our community, our world is relational and storied. From our building we can open a window to the story—each window allowing in the freshness of an intersecting narrative. These intersecting narratives may be operative among different layers of interconnectedness. These layers form in the individual, the family, the church community, the judicatory, the denomination, the Tradition, and so on.

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11. Gerard. Loughlin, *Telling God's Story Bible, Church, and Narrative Theology* (Cambridge New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 23.

Our approach to ministry, then, requires that we have a layered portrait of our ministerial context. We are trying to grasp the "what is," the present in that context, and to understand how that moment is defined by its past and/or its future. We seek to catalog the present futures, the possible futures that are emerging and perhaps even then to encourage and enable a preferred future to prevail.

We frame all research methods that will enable our portrait to resolve itself as a collection of stories. There is no prioritization of "hard data" over "anecdotal data." We are trying to glimpse the unfolding of unique meaning from the interpersonal interaction we observe. We are not comparing the ongoing discourses to a normative script that infers a prior plan or framework, but we are trying to evoke the story so that we may hear its nuances and emergent meanings. We want our research methods to be evocative not prescriptive.

As we open windows to reality we expect to experience multi-sensory input from outside our location within the larger story. We expect to "hear" content and process. We expect to "smell" odors and fragrances that the story suggests or images. We expect to "taste" the food and hospitality of the ministerial context, to "feel" tension, stagnation, peace, textures—rough, stiff, rugged, smooth—exhibited in the contours of the narratives of the context. We expect to "see" the symbolic structures, gestures, rituals and relationship patterns.

Just as in archaeology, where one works from a very limited number of artifacts to reconstruct what was, so we with this approach are often trying to discern "what is" from a small sampling of the stories impinging upon our ministry context. In archaeology one often extrapolates on the basis of three or four aligned stones to portray a building or floor or wall. Likewise with this method we make assessments from the snippets we uncover about what the "*what is*" could be.

Elizabeth Barnes[12] has offered us one hermeneutical method which slides in nicely to this approach to congregational study. She agrees that story is primary to understanding the experience of people in relationship to each other and God. She also says that this storied tradition of the Christian faith is present in the church today, even though modern people may have only vague or incomplete connection with it. The way in which we can reestablish this connection in counsel and spiritual guidance, says Barnes, is to evoke the human story, and then mediate the *interlacing* of the biblical story with the human stories. Barnes continues:

> …biblical stories are normative precisely because they interlace with our other stories in a way that makes the biblical texts authoritatively functional as shapers of us and our view of the world. It is in this way that Christians can speak of the Bible as God's word and as God's living Word. Scripture's liveliness inheres in its interlacing genius. The power of the Spirit is the power to interlace the biblical narratives with humankind's multitudinous narratives so that transformation occurs and a true story is told.[13]

By entangling the various stories of the contexts that we connect to the larger stories of the faith traditions, including biblical stories, and ultimately to God's story in the Word which forms us anew, we hope to become more closely adjusted to and formed by God's story in the world.

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12. Elizabeth B. Barnes, *The Story of Discipleship Christ, Humanity, and Church in Narrative Perspective* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995) Drawing on a variety of sources, including contemporary fiction, Barnes provides a creative and persuasive argument as to how narrative can enrich the church`s understanding of the gospel.

13. Barnes, *The Story of Discipleship Christ, Humanity, and Church in Narrative Perspective*, 9.

What Is Theological Reflection In This New Approach?

Christian theological reflection has been defined in a wide variety of ways over many centuries. The resultant pastoral/theological models have been thoroughly articulated by others, for example, Hiltner, Browning, Oden, and Clinebell.[14] For our purposes, we seek a definition that is both pastoral and practical, and which engages ministry in the church and world. Therefore, our view has some compatibility with a tentative definition posted by Stephen Pattison.[15] After many years of teaching pastoral theology, Pattison concludes that a particular *entree* to theological reflection that students seem to have found helpful is "to suggest that a good starting point for this activity is the model of a *critical conversation* which takes place between the Christian tradition, the student`s own faith presuppositions, and a particular contemporary situation."[16]

With thanks to Pattison, we put our postmodern narrative spin on his definition. Since it is our conviction that the meaning of human life as lived and shared is captured and given communicable structure in story form, we define theological reflection as:

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14. See, Seward Hiltner, *Preface to Pastoral Theology.* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1958); Don S. Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology Descriptive and Strategic Proposals* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991); Thomas C. Oden, *Pastoral Theology Essentials of Ministry* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1982); Howard John Clinebell and Howard Clinebell, *Basic Types of Pastoral Care & Counseling Resources for the Ministry of Healing and Growth* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984).

15. James Woodward, Stephen. Pattison, and John Patton, *The Blackwell Reader in Pastoral and Practical Theology*, ed. James Woodward, Blackwell Readings in Modern Theology (Oxford Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 2000).

16. Stephen Pattison, "'Some Straw for the Bricks: A Basic Introduction to Theological Reflection," in *The Blackwell Reader in Pastoral and Practical Theology*, ed. James Woodward, Blackwell Readings in Modern Theology (Oxford Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), 136.

Critical conversation that takes place at the intersection of the multiple narratives surrounding a particular contemporary situation nestled in a particular ministry context.

This definition allows latitude for discovering what those multiple narratives are from the context itself, rather than predicting them. It does seem obvious that the pastoral leader/researcher's personal faith story, the mediated story of the Christian tradition, including the story of a particular faith expression (religious institution, denomination, judicatory, sect), cultural discourse and intergenerational history, and the individual, family, and group stories surrounding a ministry situation, are among those likely to intersect around the situation.

Where Do We Begin?

Critical pastoral/theological reflection begins with reflection on contemporary *situations* confronted in the storied realities of discipleship and ministry. Such reflection invites the pastoral theologian, the D.Min. student, to raise questions about what God is doing in the situation, and how the faithful might join God's transformative action. And, because the situation is always nestled within a *specific contemporary context*, the wisdom as well as the folly of that contemporary society and its dominant discourse must be folded into our reflection. God's intention can, with the Spirit's leading, be discovered through reflection on the convergence of forces in contemporary society as well as on, say, the experience of the apostles. One of the ways God's truth can be discovered is by reading the "human document."[17]

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17. Anton T. Boisen, *The Exploration of the Inner World a Study of Mental Disorder and Religious Experience* (New York: Harper, 1936).

Explorations of the personal and professional narratives of the researcher seem to follow after the location of and engagement with the situation in the process of situation analysis. This is because those who study ministry situations tend to both see and interpret through the shady glass of their own experience, thought forms, internalized cultural discourse, and faith group commitments. We have a tendency to miss or ignore the other narratives influencing the situation of ministry. So, there is no such thing as "objective" or "value-free" research in ministry.[18]

Ministry practice and research always launches from the agenda of the religious professional, however covertly it is held. Therefore, we cannot ensure the truth or validity of theological statements arising from our research findings. We can only understand as thoroughly as possible our stories and those that surround a ministry situation, and give voice to what we discern. This allows us to keep them in a more appropriate relationship to the field of study so that they are seen only as one voice in a family of intersecting stories unfolding in the narrative study of the ministry context. It is important to honestly and critically scrutinize what we really hold as religious truth in our own hearts and heads. Using the rigor of critical thinking and reflecting, it is a worthy effort to search out our own strongly held beliefs and determine how these can be placed in respectful, open engagement with the thought and faith of others.

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[18] The sociological term "value" refers to attitudes, beliefs or opinions which people hold more or less strongly and which influence their behavior. One can find many studies which discuss the "value-freedom" issue in research. I take a position that builds upon the work of Max Weber who held two points which are useful in thinking about the issue: 1. Values are a central feature of all societies and so are at the heart of sociological study. 2. Sociologists are part of the societies they study and so it follows that they will be influenced by those values. The interpretive sociologists who followed upon Weber, without his idealism that research could be conducted with value freedom even if the researcher were not, held that objectivity is impossible. See the article, "Can Sociology be Value-Free?" [cite] http://www.connectpublications.co.uk/pdf/Central%20Issues%20in%20Sociology/valuessample.pdf

Next in importance, it seems to us, is our resolve to listen to and reflect upon the multiple, intersecting personal and faith community stories of those who are a part of our ministry settings. These stories reveal how those who serve as church leaders in ministry identify themselves as people of God. Such identifications will clarify the resources of the Christian faith as defined by our traditions that are available for assessing situations involving ethical dilemmas, questions of morality, political power and process, psychological and sociological realities, marriage and family, environmental crises, and pastoral-theological concerns such as suffering, loss, death, evangelism, church structure, discipleship, and future hope.

Finally, theological reflection can be framed by identifying the sources of revelation which lead to insight and theological understanding. In this regard, Albert Outler's widely respected criteria for identifying divine activity in the midst of life are enlightening. Outler's definition of theology in general is instructive as an approach to pastoral theology. He is the author of section 4, Par. 63, of the publication, *Doctrines and Discipline of the United Methodist Church.*[19] This statement, "Our Theological Task," begins with the simple words: "Theology is our effort to reflect upon God's gracious action in our lives." Outler goes on to say that this task is critical and constructive, individual and communal, contextual and incarnational, and essentially practical. He cites four "Sources and Criteria" for guiding our theological task:

Scripture—the primary source and criterion for Christian doctrine

Tradition—the story of the church and of God's continuing activity
   through the history of the church.

Experience—examination of individual and corporate experience to
   confirm realities of God's grace attested in scripture.

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19. United Methodist Church (U.S.), *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church, 2004.* (Nashville, Tenn.: United Methodist Pub. House, 2004), 74

Reason—all truth is from God, reason is one way we seek to understand
and appropriate that truth.

Outler continues by saying that "[i]n theological reflection, the resources of tradition, experience, and reason are integral to our study of scripture without displacing scripture's primacy for faith and practice."[20]

In this same vein one asks, "What light do scripture, tradition, experience, and reason throw upon the contemporary situations under study? What do you notice in the analysis of the multiple narratives surrounding a ministry situation that leads you to conclude that these revelatory influences are present? Likewise, how do scripture, tradition, experience, and reason provide windows into understanding the storied experience of the communities to which you minister, and which you will be studying?"

Evoking Stories from the Situation

We become skilled at evoking stories from the ministry situation by first claiming and understanding our own stories as leaders/researchers. Those who lead and would study their faith communities inevitably participate in the very myopia they seek to remedy through research. Therefore, essential to the elucidation of the whole story of a concern or opportunity faced by a faith community is attaining a grasp of the ways in which *the researcher's own story* intersects with the narrative of concern or opportunity and the multiple narratives that engage with it. Our own stories and the meanings with which they are suffused—meanings that we hold dear—are to some extent projected

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20. United Methodist Church (U.S.), *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church, 2004.*, 83.

onto our research efforts and shape our presence as students and facilitators of change in these communities.

Now, we cannot discard our own histories, nor should we try. Rather, in this approach, researchers, as well as those who participate with them, are more likely to evoke a true story of the faith community if they first study and claim the storied influences of their own birth families, cultural contexts, education, social experience, theological outlook, faith tradition, and preferred ways to do and participate in ministry. For these influences together are the lens through which they see and describe what they study. Hence, those who do research in ministry themselves may need to recognize how their identities have been shaped by their dominant cultural messages. These cultural messages are organized in the form of internalized story lines, or scripts, that shape their perceptions of reality, choices and behavior. There are many kinds of scripts people carry around within, but each person has made choices about which internal voice(s) to follow. This is usually the script that reflects the dominant culture in which the person is located, but it may not tell a full story, or even a preferred one, which may lurk behind it, hidden and unexpressed (shadow script). For instance, a person may have grown up in a culture where men are seen, and expected to behave as, the "strong ones." Yet they may yearn for a relational style that is egalitarian, relational, and free of gender bias.[21] *Externalizing* and giving voice to this alternative, shadow story can bring change and healing.

D.Min. students are dramatically influenced by their dominant scripts, past or current shadow scripts, and other internalized, organized story lines, just as are those

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21. Joan D. Atwood, "Social Construction Theory and Therapy Assumptions," in *Family Scripts*, ed. Joan D. Atwood (Washington, DC: Accelerated Development, 1996), 12–22

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whom they study in personal or community ministry sites. Their scripts largely determine the ways in which they read and interpret the storied data they gather. Hence, the researcher's self-awareness extends to establishing the *role of the leader/researcher in this postmodern approach.* The elements of this role are numerous.

First, the researcher is a *story broker*. By drawing out the multiple narratives that intersect around a concern or opportunity, the researcher facilitates a faith community's negotiation between a *problem-saturated story* (an existing negative state or condition that concerns them or a potential not yet realized) and *a preferred, emerging story* (a new state or condition that excites them and advances God's ministry among them). Stating it metaphorically, the D. Min. student leader/researcher encourages people to "sing out" their new song, and sings along with them.

Second, the postmodern leader/researcher assumes a *kenotic position* as a handler of people's stories. That is, to the extent possible, the researcher empties her/himself of preconceptions, paradigms of interpretation, or presumptions about the stories that emerge. In addition, the researcher looks within the tangled and sometimes confusing maze of intermeshing narratives for clues that may guide interpretation of a narrative of concern or opportunity. Specifically, the researcher keeps an especially sharp eye out for moments when a community or persons reveal their emerging, preferred story.

Third, the leader/researcher remains as self-differentiated and non-reactive as possible. When people share their stories they frequently come into conflict with those whose outlook on a concern or opportunity is quite different than their own. People perceive difference from others in their personal and social lives because their defining narratives, or stories, are unique, as are their individual and corporate contexts. Therefore, their ways of discerning meaning and organizing their lives are distinctive,

frequently leading to a perception of difference. Postmodern ministry research therefore affirms that addressing differences adds to learning and growth.

Defining a Narrative of Concern or Opportunity

In our judgment, research in ministry is the most productive when it is carefully and modestly designed. A promising beginning for such research is identifying the point of intersection of the multiple narratives that surface around a story, or narrative of concern, or opportunity that has arisen in the community's awareness or experience. Each of these intersecting narratives is likely to provide a particular slant on the concern or opportunity. Listening to and reflecting on each of these stories brings the researcher closer to an informed awareness and working understanding of the concern or opportunity. Each of the narratives "thickens" in depth and insight the description of the concern or opportunity and of any preferred, emerging, alternative story that will become the impetus and guide for future action. And, because the identity of a congregation or other ministry site is shaped by its ever-changing story, clarity about its current identity may also surface through this research. Decades ago Gregory Bateson, anthropologist and psychologist, made the social science community more aware of the subjective nature of reality and of learning.[22] As shown in his discussion of "news of difference," which refers to the tension between what is said and what is not said, Bateson was convinced that new learning occurs when human beings are presented with a comparison of one set of events in time with another. Building upon this, family theorist Michael White observed that many families with whom he worked adapted to their problems and were not aware of the ways in which these problems affected the rest of their lives because they could not see the difference between what was and what

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22. See Gregory Bateson, *Mind and Nature a Necessary Unity*, Advances in Systems Theory, Complexity, and the Human Sciences (Cresskill, N.J.: Hampton Press, 2002) or Gregory. Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

could be.[23] Human beings seem to sail along under the power of one set of guiding thoughts and are not likely to change until they are presented with credible and promising alternatives.

What is true of families is patently true of many faith communities and those who lead them. Congregations and other religious bodies are often strangely unaware of how their defining, dominant discourses serve to obscure a latent, more functional, faithful, and hopeful story. They simply do not "get it" that within the hearts of the people there are other meaningful, more exciting, and promising yearnings for and knowledge of faith practice that represent the captive potentials of God's new story for them. Atwood, the postmodern scholar of narrative theory cited previously,[24] reminds us that shadow scripts[25] are those alternative internal (though not unconscious) plans that do not square with the dominant script, and are opposite from it. They contain the things not said, behaviors not attempted, and gestures that have not been made.

It follows that, if revealed and acted upon, shadow scripts represent the seeds of change and of more authentic living. Or, if these are negative self or other perceptions that are externalized and irresponsibly claimed and acted upon, they can be self-destructive and lead to broken relationships. On the other hand, the sharing of problematic shadow scripts responsibly in a secure and caring fellowship can lead to redemption and a more authentic and integrated faith. For instance, church members who confront their own secret yearnings to be professional church leaders (shadow script), and own the disruptive and competitive behaviors that express this conflict, can be freed to serve God with their own unique gifts (preferred story). Or, a faith

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23. Gerald Monk, *Narrative Therapy in Practice the Archaeology of Hope* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1997), 7.

24. Atwood, "Social Construction Theory and Therapy Assumptions," 16.

community, whose public face is open and inclusive (dominant discourse), comes to grips with a long-standing, covert practice of ignoring and marginalizing "certain types" of people (shadow script) and re-stories itself to face its demons and be intentionally inclusive. Such realizations can be painful, but can also lead to change and renewal.

Faith communities have both kinds of shadow scripts described above. When they are shared and embraced in faith, they may either lead to the resolution of inner conflicts or to the emergence of a preferred, more hopeful story. Nevertheless, faith communities often remain under the influence of dominant story scripts that define them and that are maintained by the personally and culturally prescribed language and practices of the community at work and worship. These communities are heavily influenced in structure and character by their specific socio-cultural, geographical, ethnic *contexts*. Sometimes they simply plunge ahead, with little sensitivity to the ways they disallow a diversity of voices to be heard, or how they thwart their own hidden, exciting potentials for creating ministries of challenge and care. Less dominant, or marginalized, members frequently remain mute, preventing the orchestration of newer and fuller divine music. Thus, they miss out on the alternative stories waiting to be told and made manifest in ministry.

Evoking Research Stories That Intersect with the Situation

In addition to the *situational stories* harvested in the narrative research described above, there are other sources that help to flesh out the definition of a community's ministry concern or opportunity and augment and strengthen the ministry project. These are the *research stories* garnered from theological texts, social science, and the mining of found documents.

[25] Further definition of shadow script.

Theological reflection is generated by attention to the situation and to the leader's/researcher's own story and tradition. The ministry concern or opportunity usually suggests further study of theological texts that expand the theory and scope of that reflection. Stories and story fragments are also to be found by opening the senses to written research findings that bear upon the concern or opportunity.

For instance, social analysis provides needed demographic information about the community context, such as its economic, ethnic, cultural, political, institutional and family structures. There are many guides for doing social analysis.

Other social science resources, such as relevant research methods, instruments for measurement and evaluation, psychological theory, forms of political analysis, and tools for congregational study, may be suggested by the concern or opportunity itself. The research team should treat the ideas, meanings, and data gleaned from this research as story fragments that contribute to the understanding of a real or right story as gathered into the mutual perceptions of, and agreed upon by, the community. The researcher should always be aware that the data (content) may lead to clues about the process that should really be the focus of concern.

Further, evoking the dimensions of the story, its plots, sub-plots, and "flesh," is not limited to personal conversation and reading scholarly texts. Found documents, reflections on group process, meeting notes, journals, histories, films, symbolic objects, church architecture, reports on congregational engagement with community, denominational, regional, or national issues, and other research sources, all contribute to discernment of the fuller defining narrative of the ministry setting and the influential narratives of participants and members. Similarly, documents such as minutes, sermons, legal proceedings; secondary theological sources such as confessions, books of

worship, hymnals, rites and rituals; vision statements and educational curricula augment the research effort. Stories are also told in the music of the community and those who produce it. Crematories or grave sites surely tell a story, too. So do the many forms of play that cement community fellowship. Testimonies and confessions tell the story of a community's witness and its faith stance. Sensitivity to these intersecting multiple story fragments moves the research team closer to a plain or right sense of the community's story. In a way it is ironic that at the moment you crystallize the discovery; you disengage from the process of discovery. And yet, evaluation is a very necessary part of research. Unless we at some point disengage from the ongoing practice of ministry, we may fall prey to only hearing our own voice, our own narrative, and lose the transcendent. The evaluation process enables us to step back from an instrumental use of reason to control something that "works" and to reflect on the presence of the divine unfolding. It is necessary at times to retreat from the actualization of faith in a practice of ministry in order to re-imagine the story and to listen again to the narratives of context.

In terms of the approach we have set forth in this paper, the purpose of evaluation for us differs from one that merely organizes the data or presents the findings. There are two parts to our notion of evaluation: observing change and discerning transformation. As previously we employed analyses of varied types to de-confuse the context, we now employ techniques of evaluation to represent that context in its new intersection with the narratives of participants, surrounding external groups, tradition, and biblical story. This evaluation emphasizes the aspect of storytelling that is informative, but as we know, in its telling story may also be transformative to the reader as well.

We see a form of evaluation that consists of two distinct parts. One part is observing change. This first part is fairly straightforward: you compare the state of the

context prior to a new ministry intervention and afterward. In a sense, this part of evaluation is only a measurement process. Has there been change in activity, habits, stories told, etc.?

The second part is discerning transformation. The definition of transformation is "a marked change, as in appearance or character, usually for the better."[26] The latter part of this definition is critical in this understanding of the purpose of evaluation—discerning transformation toward a preferred future.

Transformation refers to a change in structure, appearance or character—"for the better." Assessing these kinds of change is at the heart of the evaluation of ministry projects. However, we can imagine what a slippery slope this can be! In this article we merely suggest perspectives on transformation that could help to thicken the evaluation story without squeezing the project story into a paradigmatic mold. This perspectival approach[27] to evaluation envisions the ministry project story as a diamond with many facets. In order to appreciate the diamond's holistic beauty one must either turn the diamond slowly or encircle it, so that the refracted light of the Spirit can shine into our eyes from each facet to enlighten us. We suggest below that we alternate among different positions around the diamond, to fully sense the project story and come closer to understanding the "gem" in all of its beauty.

There are at least five perspectives to choose from for this evaluation.[28] These perspectives assist the researcher in discerning and articulating the "thickened" story emerging from the project's contexts. Typical ways of examining the renewed post-

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26. *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language.* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000).

27. We are indebted to Seward Hiltner for this image. See his book, *Hiltner, Preface to Pastoral Theology.*

project context include functionalist, ecological, materialist, structuralist, and semiotic perspectives. These perspectives enable one to examine any transition in identity or social interaction and to assess the "realness" or "rightness" of the conclusion of the project. Identity includes the boundaries and worldview of the context, the team, and the student. As each of these three were affected by the process, so a change in any can be studied to determine the value of the project and its impact.

Looking more closely at the perspectives that may be employed in evaluation, we turn first to how functionalist evaluation might examine how the combining narratives of the context fit together pre- and post-project. This perspective seeks to discern how parts of a context might fit together differently now. It builds on the sense that if one component system is changed, that change affects the whole. While this perspective can be used in a deterministic way, it also allows for the researcher to discern "unintended" consequences that may have emerged by the programmed initiatives.

Traditionally, the ecological approach is employed when determining how a society relates to its physical environment. In our approach to understanding a specific context in its larger context, we may move this understanding of ecology beyond a simple physical basis. That is, the ecology of a ministerial context does indeed incorporate its relationship to the physical environment, but we may include its relationship to other larger cultural contexts. These larger contexts function perhaps as the physical landscape in which the ministerial context resides. Take, for example, a local church that is located in an urban area. The urban physical landscape is the physical environment that the ministerial context relates to on one level, and one can move outward to the global environment from that starting point. But the local church also relates to

[28] These perspectives are first developed by Robert Schreiter as ways of listening to a culture in his work on local theology. He details how local theology develops from the encounter with stimulus from the larger culture. See, Robert J. Schreiter, Constructing Local Theologies (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1985).

other larger contexts that could also be construed as its ecological environment. For instance, the denomination that a congregation participates in could be a larger context. Thus one could discern if there has been a change in how the ministerial context, the team, or the researcher relate to these larger entities.

The materialist perspective closely resembles the previous perspective except in one important dimension. While the ecological perspective looks at how the context relates to the larger environment, the materialist perspective looks at how the context is affected by changes in the surrounding environment. The larger environment can affect the context, the team or the researcher's worldview, and needs and responses to social change. Thus in employing this approach one would look at factors "beyond control" that impinged during the project implementation phase and their discerned influence on the emergent story.

The structuralist approach looks for unconscious patterns that may shape the context. This may have remained unobserved during the development phases of the project, when narratives were being listened to and a project was being proposed, only to come to the fore as resistive elements to the changing of the story of the future of the context, team or researcher. The post-project structure may instead be an emerging structure. New patterns arise to replace old ones, or new textures are applied to old patterns. By examining these, one can gain a renewed sense of the identity of the context as it exists and perhaps gain insight toward unforeseen barriers to the emergence of a preferred story.

The semiotic approach examines the images, messages, codes and metaphors that express meaning for the context. The approach relies heavily on descriptions of that context from within (emic) or from without (etic) the context. It is likely that the researcher will, as participant within the context, be able to discern only from inside the

narratives that affirm the identity of the group. However, it may be possible to examine narratives explaining and analyzing the experience of the context from the outside, comparing the experience of the group from a similar cultural setting. One could examine the context's intended message of concern to that of the message that is related meaningfully to the larger cultural setting; the spoken story to the heard story. Whether one or more of these perspectives is employed is secondary to the goal of obtaining a holistic sense of the emergence of the new within the ministerial context. The key is to encounter the developments engendered by the project's stimulus and/or by changes in the larger narrative context of the culture. This encounter may lead the researcher to affirm, modify or correct the pre-project discernment as well as to uncover forgotten or avoided parts of the local narratives. The hope is to stimulate further positive developments in the emergence of a preferred future.

Final Remarks

We stated previously, a story intends a future. Recognition of what has happened can lead to the possibility of re-imagining and affecting what is to come. Our narrative approach's aim is to express the meaning held in the "what is" of the present configuration of the many intersecting narratives of a faith community and to explore the concerns and opportunities embedded within that community. We observe changes in conditions and discern transformations and changes in identity. We seek to entangle the local story of faith again, consciously, intentionally, with a plain sense of the story given to us by God.

This is a dynamic process that may lead to affirmation, modification or correction of previously held myths and parables that describe our understanding of reality. The preferred future may emerge from the collaboration of our speaking and listening to

God directly and to God through each other. Together we hope transformation, which is that change for the better, takes place.

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