# Theological Reflection as a Catalyst for Leadership Convergence Through the D.Min. Dissertation

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## ABSTRACT

Doctor of Ministry programs are unique – they assemble seasoned adult ministry practitioners for high level formation aimed at increased effectiveness. D.Min, programs are ideal for bringing greater focus to ministry and professional destiny, known in Leadership Emergence Theory as "convergence." Theological reflection can be a major catalyst for convergence within the D.Min. dissertation process. This paper presents a model for using theological reflection as a catalyst for leadership convergence through the D.Min. dissertation.

## Introduction

The author directs the Doctor of Ministry program at Regent University in Virginia Beach, Virginia. The curriculum is designed to produce high level leadership formation for experienced ministry practitioners by sharpening their ministry focus through a series of class experiences and a culminating dissertation. It is the author's contention that the dissertation environment is ideal for facilitating "convergence" in a leader's life by using theological reflection as a catalyst, thereby fulfilling a major part of our program's mission.

Convergence takes place in a leader's life when giftedness, role, and influence come into alignment with experience, personality, formation, opportunity, and destiny.[1] Theological reflection can be used as a major driving force to fuel a student's

[1] Clinton, Dr. J. Robert. *Leadership Emergence Theory.* (Altadena, California: Barnabas Resources, 1989), 381.

understanding of critical incidents that worked to move them toward convergence.[2] The dissertation experience provides an excellent opportunity to facilitate leadership convergence in a student's life as it focuses on a narrow area of life and ministry experiences that are unique to the student's giftedness and role in ministry.

## Experience and Theological Education

Historically speaking, the role of experience in theological education has been suspect in the Western world because of a cultural bias toward reason and the historical roots of formal theological education in the Western academy as they originated in Western Europe. Some of that suspicion can be traced back to the founding of the University of Berlin in 1810. Friedrich Schleiermacher, a noted German theologian and philosopher, saw that the new university was in danger of not including theology in the university's curriculum on the grounds that it had no place in a modern critical research-based school. Schleiermacher argued that *Wissenschaft* (disciplined critical research) had an important role in the education of professional clergy and therefore theology had a place in the new research university.[3] His argument to include theology in the curriculum was accepted, and theology became part of the new university's curriculum.

Schleiermacher's intent was for theology to impact the overall university and its curriculum in a positive way. Unfortunately, his intent was not realized as the more

[2] Leadership Emergence Theory defines a "process item" as a sovereign experience introduced into an emerging leader's life that is use to shape his or her character, ministry skills, or ministry philosophy.
[3] Paver, John. E. *Theological Reflection and Education for Ministry.* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2006), 7-9.

academic and philosophical pursuits eclipsed the role of practical theology and applied ministry. A bias toward the more intellectual and academic pursuits was born in the academy's curricula, even in the area of theology. Many still wrestled with the role experience should play in theological education, and how to actually work this out into ministerial training.

It is not as though the debate over the best ways to discover truth or the place of experience in this quest is new. We are in good company with the likes of John Wesley, whose life work earned him similar suspicion. His ministry emphasized a reflective inward life and an experiential personal relationship with God to counter the sterile and distant forms of expression found in the established religion of his day. The term "Theology by Heart" was coined to embody Wesley's integration of life experience in learning through theological reflection as was embodied in his journaling practices.

Wesleyan theology is known for its appeal to a spectrum of four different authorities that could guide in the quest to discover truth. When Wesley's writings are examined, it is clear that Wesley considered these four authorities, in tension and proper balance, as the most reliable way to discover truth. These four authorities are revelation (Scripture as divine revelation), reason (critical thought and examination), tradition (the collective wisdom of other ages), and experience (the heart of faith interacting with life).[4] These four essential authorities are embedded in the writings of Wesley and have become known as the "Wesleyan Quadrilateral," a name apparently first used by Outler in the 1960s as a way to conceive of the task of theology.[5]

[4] Thorsen, David A.D. *The Wesleyan Quadrilateral*. (Nappanee, Indiana: Francis Asbury, 1997), 21.
[5] Ibid.

## Theological Reflection and Ministerial Formation

Discussions about the place of experience in theological education during the 1980s and 1990s have resulted in some movement toward balance between academics and applied ministry in Western theological education. Beginning in the 1990s, there was a proliferation of work related to theological reflection. The term "theological reflection" was used to describe the act of integrating experience with theology in the quest for truth.[6]

Kinast observes that theological reflection begins with the lived experience of those doing the reflection. The individual begins to correlate his or her experience with sources of Christian tradition, drawing out personal implications for Christian living and ministry, in a natural and common sense manner.[7] Killen and de Beer go further to say that theological reflection weaves together the threads of our lives and our religious heritage to produce a single story of God's faithfulness – it is a means to put our experience into genuine conversation with our religious heritage and tradition.

Theological reflection seems to have its catalytic effect on ministerial formation because it works the Quadrilateral and makes room for the tensions necessary for revelation, tradition, experience, and reason to have their voice in understanding truth. Beyond that, theological reflection aims right at the heart of what makes us human to begin with – the drive for uncovering meaning in life. It seems that life, by its very

[6] Kinast, Robert L. *What are They Saying About Theological Reflection?* (New York: Paulist, 2000), 1.
[7] Ibid., 2.

nature, invites us to reflect, by asking the question "why?"[8] The question is asked because of a deep-seated need for meaning that humans possess. When we reflect, we are acting in a uniquely human way, and utilizing a God-given gift to search for truth.

Killen and de Beer assert that there are four centering aspects of experience that need to be in conversation during the reflection process in order to effectively "gather the fruit."[9] Tradition (Scripture, doctrine, history, popular lore), action (lived narratives with their actions, feelings, and thoughts), positions (convictions, beliefs, opinions), and culture (ideas and artifacts from one's social and physical environment) are central to the discovery of meaning in the reflection process. The essential ingredients to fruitful reflection are personal honesty, time spent in reflection, study, and prayer. One must develop a rhythm of reflection that is disciplined to stop and linger, and then develop the habit of acting on the insights that are gained.[10] Fostering companionship by using others in the reflection process often develops further depth of meaning, which seems to be ideal in the context of many D.Min. programs, which are often cohort centered by design.

Theological reflection assumes that the deepest and fullest meaning of life is never fully understood immediately as it occurs – it must be mined later as it is explored from memory. We become what Eugene Lowry calls "first listeners" as we lay aside our own agenda and seek God's agenda in our experiences.[11] In essence, we allow the Bible to "read us," as we reflect theologically on its application to life and

[8] Ibid., 1.
[9] Killen, Patricia O'Connell, and de Beer, John. *The Art of Theological Reflection.* (New York: Crossroad, 1997), 60-66.
[10] Ibid.
[11] Lowry, Eugene L. *How to Preach a Parable.* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1989), 33.

ministry, taking on the heart of a child once again (Mark 10:15). This is what Killen and de Beer refer to as "movement toward insight."[12] This mining involves experiencing the event once again by accessing our memory and using words to describe it (narrative process). This reflective process becomes an interpretive framework as memory meets word in narrative, challenging our deeply held beliefs, biases, convictions, attitudes, and ways of responding to life.

## Theological Reflection and Leadership Emergence Theory

Understanding how ministry leaders develop illustrates how the deliberate use of theological reflection can act as a catalyst for these kinds of growth. J. Robert Clinton is responsible for some valuable studies in the field of leadership formation. His studies are a response to what he perceived to be a shortage of leaders and leadership in the church in the 1970s and early 1980s. He and his students at Fuller studied the lives of several hundred biblical, historical, and contemporary leaders to look for key patterns and elements of leadership and leadership formation. From these studies, which number more than 3,000 as of 1995, Clinton was able to build an evaluative framework to describe how emerging leaders are formed over the course of their lifetime, which he has called Leadership Emergence Theory (LET).[13]

LET assumes that leadership development is a lifelong process - people spend most of their lives becoming leaders rather than being leaders. It asserts that every

[12] Ibid., xi.

[13] Clinton, J. Robert. *Strategic Concepts that Clarify a Focused Life.* (Altadena, California: Barnabas, 1995, revised 2005), 1.

experience in a person's life is used to form them as a leader, whether positive or negative. The basic assumption in LET is that God is constantly and sovereignty at work to shape each person into an effective leader and to produce the greatest fruitfulness possible from their lives. The role of theological reflection is central to LET.

## Phases of Leadership Development

Clinton's research has led to the discovery of six distinct phases of leadership development over the lifetime of a leader. For D.Min, students, these phases can provide a valuable framework for guidance for their personal theological reflection by helping them conceptualize their own unique leadership formation. Directed theological reflection produces a greater sense of continuity with God's work in their past, a higher degree of anticipation for God's work in the future, and a heightened capacity for learning through the experiences of others.[14] This produces a renewing effect in their personal relationship with God, their level of passion for calling, and sense that they are fulfilling a God-given destiny.

### *Sovereign Foundations*

In LET, the *Sovereign Foundations* phase begins at birth and characteristically lasts through childhood, the teenage years, and into a person's early twenties. This is the time when God's operation is often sovereign because life's choices and circumstances

[14] Clinton (1989), 17.

are largely out of our own control. In this phase, basic personality and character building blocks are being laid, and destiny is being shaped with the raw ingredients that experience provides. God works providentially in a person's lives through environment, family, historical events, geographical location, and other factors that are often beyond our control.

The primary lessons that can be mined from this phase of development include God's sovereign hand in shaping our unique identity and threads that confirm God's equipping for future calling. These early formative experiences often go unnoticed and only come to light as a person deliberately reflects on the events that occurred very early in life. Theological reflection is critical to unlocking the lessons learned from this phase of development, and can even be used as a powerful source to confront negative events and their consequences to facilitate healing and wholeness.[15]

***Inner Life Growth***

The *Inner Life Growth* phase typically occurs when an individual is in their early twenties and lasts into their thirties, emphasizing the development of the internal character necessary to sustain the weight of future ministry. Movement from the Sovereign Foundations phase usually occurs in response to some kind of call to action when the emerging leader takes on general ministry tasks in a training capacity. In this phase of leadership development, the goal is not results or even the development of ministry skills, but rather the development of character that will be necessary later on in

[15] Clinton, J. Robert. *The Making of a Leader*. (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1988), 44.

life to sustain successful and protracted ministry. Here the individual learns the basics of discerning God's call and direction, and to follow His leading and their conscience. People in this phase of development have the temptation to become restless in movement toward perceived calling, rather than allowing the time necessary for the character development that will be necessary to support that call.[16]

Reflection on this phase of leadership development is vital to seasoned ministry practitioners so they can grasp God's formative work in their life experiences as a foundation for shaper focus in ministry and deeper awareness of their own unique professional identity. Theological reflection in this phase of development can also catch and correct areas of character that were not sufficiently developed that now exist as potential weaknesses that could hinder effectiveness or fruitfulness.

### *Ministry Maturing*

The *Ministry Maturing* phase of leadership development occurs many times when an individual is in their thirties or early forties. This is the time when ministry becomes the major focus of an emerging leader's life. The primary focus of God's work in this leadership phase is to increase the leader's capacity to lead and to increase his or her capacity for fruitfulness. In this phase of development, a leader learns to submit to authority and to use his or her authority for the betterment of others. The leader learns skills for conflict management and to graciously respond to leadership backlash, which often occurs when change is initiated by a leader. Lessons in setting aside one's ego,

[16] Ibid., 45.

hurt feelings, the desire to defend, and thirst for revenge are abundant and become an essential part of the developing leader's people skills inventory.

This phase usually starts when a person accepts a call into ministry that consumes their time. It involves the sharpening of ministry and relational skills. The common temptation in this phase of development is to become hypersensitive to productivity rather than personal development. Understanding this phase is essential for D.Min. program directors because some of the individuals entering the D.Min. program will be in this phase of development, and it is easy to plateau in this phase.

A ministry plateau usually occurs because the individual has stopped taking new risks or has not taken advantage of their skills and gifting in a deliberate manner. They may also have become frozen because they could not accept one or more of the lessons to be learned through difficult ministry circumstances or have not learned to follow or lead well. Paralysis in ministry growth due to pain or suffering from intense circumstances is also common. In such cases, theological reflection can be the key to mining past experiences in order to discover what has caused the plateau and formulating solutions for moving forward in leadership development and ministry effectiveness.[17]

***Life Maturing***

Because of their age and level of experience, many D.Min students come into the program in the *Life Maturing* phase of their ministry. This phase typically occurs when

[17] Ibid., 77-80.

an individual is in their forties or fifties, but some never enter this phase having reached plateau in the Ministry Maturing phase of their development. This phase involves the mellowing and maturing of character in a leader's life, when their central gifts are used in a more satisfying, focused, and fruitful manner. This is a period when the leader learns that their relationship with God is far more important than ministry success, and the leader learns to enjoy simply being in relationship with God. As a result, ministry then begins to flow out of being and the leader becomes the object of imitation. The leader is no longer merely appreciated, but also admired for both their life and ministry.

Many of the individuals who enter our D.Min. programs will be in this phase of leadership development without knowing it. Many will not understand the major life crises they are experiencing and the work God is attempting to do through them. It is essential that we build experiences into our D.Min. programs that facilitate high level theological reflection related to the kinds of character development God is likely working into their lives. If theological reflection is done in a deliberate and focused manner in this phase of leadership development, if often produces a renewed determination to know God more deeply, and a more cohesive life where being and doing become fused and "I am what I do."[18]

***Leadership Convergence***

[18]Ibid., 155, 156.

The *Leadership Convergence* phase of a leader's development is the ultimate goal. This phase can start in an individual's fifties or sixties, but many never reach this level of development. In this phase of leadership, God moves an individual into a ministry opportunity that precisely fits his or her gifting and experience so closely that it maximizes their effectiveness. In convergence, the leader embodies in life the lessons learned in all other phases of their development and acts as a living example for others.[19]

As the name implies, convergence in a leader's life occurs when key factors meet (converge) at a point in time to produce a synergistic effect that moves the leader's level of ministry effectiveness to a new and more fruitful level. It typically occurs when a leader's giftedness (natural abilities, acquired skills, and spiritual gifts) matches a role that is assigned or created which allows for maximum capacity of effectiveness and fruitfulness. The central task for moving an individual toward convergence is providing the kinds of reflective experiences that will move them toward sharper focus and maximum effectiveness – toward releasing what is good to embrace what is best. Theological reflection is central to this process.

**Theological Reflection, Leadership Convergence and the D.Min. Dissertation**

The D.Min. dissertation by its very nature provides an ideal environment for theological reflection to be used to facilitate leadership convergence. It allows students the opportunity to work the Quadrilateral as life and ministry experiences are set

[19] Ibid. 46-48.

against the backdrop of revelation and tradition, while in conversation with the reasoned approach that others have taken for solving problems in ministry. The synthesis required for a D.Min. dissertation has the potential to move a person in the Ministry Maturing or the Life Maturing phase of their leadership development to a new level of ministry effectiveness. If managed correctly, the dissertation document can become a written legacy of the student's leadership convergence rather than merely a right-of-passage document collecting dust on a shelf.

## The Dissertation as a Reflective Word-Making Process

Aristotle once said that a soul never thinks without a picture. Indeed, all language in its spoken and written form simply codifies what we see with the natural eye or the mind's eye. It seems that humans were created by God to name what is seen (Gen 2:20), having been made in God's likeness. As David Buttrick, a noted homiletics scholar observes, language names the world into consciousness.[20] Word-making is a process that occurs throughout life in our learning processes. Walter J. Ong, who was a Professor of Humanities in Psychiatry, commented that all of these sensory experiences work together to construct the consciousness of our world.[21]

Our imagination is fed primarily through word and concepts.[22] From these descriptions, it is easy to understand why the theological reflection process is so integral to leadership growth and convergence. As word-making occurs and critical incidents

[20] Buttrick, David. *Homiletic: Moves and Structures.* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 6-9.
[21] See Ong, Walter J. *The Presence of the Word.* (New Haven: Yale, 1978), 1,2.
[22] Warren W. Wiersby. *Preaching and Teaching with Imagination.* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 73.

are named in the process of reflection, new insight and understanding is gained, facilitating a powerful formation process that can be harnessed to drive leadership development. The written dissertation uses word-making to organize and articulate the process clearly. The nature of the writing process itself drives allows for word-making as a basis for understanding. This process begins with reflection, continues with word-making, and drives the student toward meaning, fueling leadership convergence.

## The Dissertation as a Reflective Meaning-Making Process

Meaning is a relational term – it is not the property of an object. A word has no meaning apart from its relationship to context. Even this varies because relationship to context is highly subjective and strongly influenced by culture. In assigning meaning, we think metaphorically. Theological reflection invites meaning-making as memories connected to life and ministry are revisited and named, and metaphor (what they are like – what they "mean") is assigned to these experiences. As the D.Min. student reflects on these experiences in a paradigm for leadership development like LET, they can assign meaning to the words used to describe the experiences they articulate. They exercise the process of story-weaving to build metaphoric bridges of understanding between their past and the present.[23] If the curriculum is designed to facilitate the kind of high-level theological reflection that probes deeply and partners with the work of the Holy Spirit in the student's life, the results can be profound.

[23] Wiersby, 78-80.

The way we shape our program's dissertation experience is directly related to its impact in the student's spiritual and ministerial formation. If a D.Min. program creates an environment where a student's memories and feelings can be named in a reflective process, it can produce the kind of "movement toward insight" described by Killen and de Beer. The D.Min. program, because of its often intentional cohort structure, provides an excellent environment to both facilitate and support this kind of deep reflective processing. The D.Min. dissertation provides an excellent and deliberate way to attribute meaning to life and ministry based on theological reflection, and to use the results to solve real-time problems in ministry.

## The Dissertation as a Reflective Model for Leadership Convergence

The author advocates a full blown professional project and written dissertation structure for D.Min. curricula to facilitate high level theological reflection and leadership convergence. A full blown research or professional project linked with a strong dissertation can be designed specifically to facilitate leadership convergence if deliberate room is given to the reflective and synthetic tasks necessary to produce convergence.

### *Reflective Task*

The author's D.Min. dissertation process represents one model for facilitating deliberate theological reflection with the outcome of convergence in mind. The

dissertation schema incorporates strong elements of focus, research, and theological reflection as a foundation for a research-based project and design in the form of a full blown research project and written dissertation:

- Chapter 1: Focus of the Project and its Design
- Chapter 2: Literature Review and Case Studies
- Chapter 3: Biblical, Theological, and Historical Foundations
- Chapter 4: Project and Design
- Chapter 5: Project Results and Conclusions

The reflective task begins with an exercise to narrow the student's focus on the topic for the dissertation as outlined in Chapter One. The student is asked to define the whole dissertation's focus with a one sentence question that frames project's direction. The student is introduced to the dissertation process in the first class experience in our program, and asked to create a preliminary proposal on a focused area of research for his or her project.

This is often a cathartic experience, because it forces the student to begin to ask the "why" questions that are central to sharpening his or her focus. The student will many times begin to try to select a topic for their dissertation, but has no framework upon which to build that choice. The inability to "select a topic" creates an ideal opportunity for instruction on theological reflection in the context of Leadership Emergence Theory. The student begins to see the topic of the dissertation as an extension of their life's purpose and destiny. The dissertation process moves from a topical exercise to an exercise in personal focus and destiny. The cathartic experience of

this task is such that the student's D.Min. cohort becomes essential for emotional and spiritual support. They leave their orientation class changed by their introduction to LET and the power of theological reflection to act as a catalyst for their development.

After students complete their classes, a dissertation committee is assigned and successfully passing the Integrative Exam allows them to pass into dissertation phase. A preliminary Chapter One of the dissertation is presented in proposal form at the Integrative Exam, which describes the dissertation project, its methodology, focus, and background. As students proceeds into their dissertation work, Chapters Two and Three of the dissertation are where much of the word-making and meaning-making occur in the dissertation process. Chapter Three becomes a synthetic exercise for the student as what has been found in literature research and case study is compared to Scripture, theology, and historical tradition. In this exercise, theological reflection is used in its full capacity as the themes and outcomes that address the student's area of focus are analyzed for warrant and integrity.

By the time students have been guided by their dissertation committee through research, case study, biblical, theological, and historical reflection a profound change has usually occurred. Their own ministry has often grown more focused. There own professional identity usually has become clearer. They better understand what God has been doing in their own life and development. They more clearly see how their gifts fit with a narrow area of ministry and how their role and influence can be used more effectively. In many cases, their destiny comes into sharper focus. In short, the experience has produced ideal conditions for leadership convergence and they are

ready to move on to a synthetic task that often completes the leadership convergence process.

***Synthetic Task***

The dissertation process would not be complete before actually testing the project design and methodology that have emerged by attempting to solve a real-world problem in ministry. The leading authors in the field of theological reflection acknowledge that the insight gained in the reflective process will not produce change in an individual unless the insight is harnessed in the form of action. Chapter Four of the dissertation is reserved for a description of the research project design that was used to solve a problem in ministry and the methodology used to measure the intervention's success. Chapter Five is reserved for reporting the results of the intervention and for reflection on future possibilities that could make the intervention more successful and further work that is needed. These chapters capture the essence of the meaning-making process in the student's formation because they test abstract concepts and beliefs in the real and often unpredictable world of life and ministry.

These chapters are what have the potential to set the D.Min., with its applied focus, apart from an academic (Ph.D.) doctoral experience. The academic doctorate has taught the student to work most of the Quadrilateral with reflection on revelation, reason, and tradition, but pays homage to Schleiermacher's Ghost by affording little if any time to working those things out into the real world. There are many benefits of

this kind of doctoral work as unique contributions to the knowledge base are made, but many times the typical Ph.D. student is not able to connect the abstract truth discovered to practical application. To do so, in fact, might be a reality check for some of the abstract ideas that result from this more academic approach to research. It seems that an essential piece of meaning making is missing in this kind of doctoral experience with no real-world context to act as a living metaphor, bridging words and meaning.

In the author's dissertation model, Chapter Four captures the outcomes generated from theological reflection on other people's work and case study (Chapter Two) and which has been warranted by biblical, theological, and historical support (Chapter Three) in a description of their application to real-world problem in ministry (Chapter Four). The research project design must show obvious linkage with the outcomes that flow directly from the work done in Chapter Two and their warrant in Chapter Three. This is a synthetic operation that requires the convergence of experience, revelation, tradition, and reason, summoning all of the resource gained from theological reflection in the dissertation process. This action models and embodies leadership convergence, and the experience often provides the fuel to move the student toward convergence in their ministry.

Chapter Five is equally important as a synthetic experience because it forces the student to reflect on what has become another case study – their own dissertation journey and what they have learned. It can become a deep source of valuable ministerial and personal formation as the outcome of the intervention is evaluated and inductive thinking is again used to consider future directions for ministry intervention.

The student is then asked to examine their own leadership convergence experience during the formal dissertation defense, and often reflects on how the experience has sharpened their focus and professional identity. It seems to the author that a strong professional or research project combined with a full blown dissertation requirement has the best chance of incorporating all of these elements into a culminating exercise for the student that can be designed to facilitate leadership convergence.

## Conclusion

The author does not claim that the model that has been described is ideal or would fit the unique mission of all D.Min. programs. The results we have seen in the lives of many of our students have been encouraging and the significant number of students who have entered into leadership convergence as a result of this experience is gratifying. The author firmly believes that theological reflection can be a powerful tool in D.Min. curricula to move a student toward leadership convergence. One of the most important reasons it can do that is because it effectively works the Quadrilateral, making room for experience to once again join reason, tradition, and revelation in the quest to discover truth. This approach lays down an inductive method for approaching all life and ministry-related problems that will serve the student in his or her future ministry. When theological reflection is coupled with a strong theoretical framework for leadership development such as Leadership Emergence Theory, it can become a catalytic force to fuel the kind of high-level formation and formation the ATS

accrediting body requires for a D.Min. program. The dissertation process itself provides an effective opportunity for the word- and meaning-making process to harness the power of reflection for solving problems in ministry. If done correctly, the student experiences a high level formation experience, is moved toward leadership convergence, and contributes significantly to both their field's knowledge base and wisdom for solutions to practical ministry problems while moving toward their own leadership convergence.

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