PASTORAL ETHNOGRAPHY AND DOCTOR OF MINISTRY EDUCATION

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The term "pastoral ethnography" describes the intentional use of ethnographic methods—such as participant observation, qualitative interviews, focus groups, and the study of demographics and documentary evidence—as a form of pastoral care.[1] This form of ministry involves a detailed pastoral listening to a social group or a community of faith. This approach weaves together the insights of individual pastoral counseling with the wisdom that comes from social research, in an effort to foster a creative interplay between individual and communal spiritual growth.[2] Here I propose that the teaching of pastoral ethnography is particularly well suited to Doctor of Ministry education.

Doctor of Ministry Students

Doctor of Ministry students usually come to their programs with some years of pastoral experience. They have been to seminary; they have practiced ministry; and they have already been formed spiritually and professionally into their vocations. They also arrive in all different kinds of conditions: some are

[1] Mary Clark Moschella, *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice: An Introduction,* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2008). See this book for a more detailed understanding of the ideas and practices described in this article.
[2] Mary Clark Moschella, "Ethnography" in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology,* Ed. Bonnie Miller-McLemore, (Chichester, U.K.: Blackwell Publishing Limited, 2012), 224–233.

exhausted from work on behalf of the church and sign up for a D. Min. in order to find renewal; some are older and they anxious about being back in school after a long period away. Many have been out in the vineyards working long enough to realize that pastoral ministry can be tough and messy work. The challenge of keeping the boat afloat—just the everyday maintenance of institutional life—can be daunting. It can sap a religious leader's time and energy, leaving little enthusiasm for proactive projects and even less for prophetic ones.

Because Doctor of Ministry students typically have been battered a bit by the storms of congregational life or other forms of religious leadership, they are often eager to gain new tools, new ways of looking at, understanding, and ministering to their communities. For clergy or pastoral ministers who find themselves rushing from one task to the next, the good news in pastoral ethnography is that it involves slowing down, paying attention, listening, praying, and reflecting on God's call in the life of the group. Still, students might experience all of this as bad news at first, because pastoral ethnography does involve a great deal of work, and because it also involves changing one's approach to ministry. And who among us ever really wants to change?

In my very first Doctor of Ministry class in pastoral ethnography, students rebelled at the mere suggestion that they might have to change their approach to ministry by conducting a study. I said, perhaps too bluntly, "You can't expect your congregation to change if you are not willing to change yourself." One student answered, in blessed honesty, "I don't want to change."

The ethnographic journey, as I call it, is a journey of discovery of the faith community, but it is also a journey of spiritual self-discovery for the student. And therein lies the rub: All of this time spent on observing and listening and theological reflection puts Doctor of Ministry students in a more vulnerable position than usual. Instead of acting the part of the local religious expert, they must spend their time asking questions, seeking to learn *from* the people. As another student put it: "This is hard. I'm all excited about teaching and preaching; I'm ready for that. And now I have to hold back and ask *them* the questions."

Yet this is the shift that is the most critical for the formation of Doctor of Ministry students. It is a shift toward what Tom Frank calls "an ethnographic disposition."[3] This shift involves becoming curious. It involves asking what might seem like obvious questions, questions such as "Why do you come to church?" or "What are we really doing here, week after week?" This is a vulnerable disposition, and it may not seem appropriate to strong religious leaders seeking a doctoral degree to have to make themselves so vulnerable as to allow their church members to become their teachers. But wise leaders in many fields are now coming to see the importance of this shift toward paying attention to the insights of the members of the group. It is something akin to what is called adaptive leadership.[4]

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[3] Thomas Edward Frank, *The Soul of the Congregation: An Invitation to Congregational Reflection,* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2000), 65.
[4] Sharon Dolaz Parks, *Leadership Can Be Taught: A Bold Approach for a Complex World,* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 2005).

The most important reasons for this shift to an ethnographic disposition are pastoral-theological in nature. No one has explained this better than Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in his wonderful little book, *Life Together,* where he wrote*:*

> The first service that one owes to others in the fellowship consists in listening to them. Just as the love of God begins with listening to his word, so the beginning of love for the brethren is learning to listen to them. . . Christians, especially ministers, often think that they must always contribute something when they are in the company of others, that this is the one service they have to render. They forget that listening can be a greater service than speaking.[5]

An ethnographic disposition involves "love for the brethren" (and sisteren) that takes the form of listening to them. Indeed, "listening can be a greater service than speaking." Respectful listening to the people and honest engagement with them reveals a path toward pastoral leadership with and through the people. This is not religious leadership as a top-down exercise of authority over people. Rather, it requires patient listening, getting to know people, observing what they do as well what they say, engaging in dialogue, and eventually co-creating a pathway forward.

In pastoral ethnography, students are drawn into a deeper level of relationship with their congregants through a structured listening, speaking, and sharing process. It's not that the pastor never gets to talk, but that the pastor learns to trust in "the priesthood of all believers," and in the presence of God's Holy Spirit within the individuals and the group that he or she is called to serve.

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[5] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together: The Classic Exploration of Faith in Community,* (New York: HarperOne, 1978), 97.

The pastor learns to honor the congregation that is right there in front of him or her, by listening, watching, paying attention, and exploring the faith that the group is enacting, with all of its flaws and all of its promise.

Doctor of Ministry students come back to school for all different reasons, some more noble than others. When they engage in pastoral ethnography, they are often challenged to think about what really matters to them, what their particular call to ministry has been and where God might be leading them in the future. They are challenged, though, to understand this sense of call with and through their parishioners or group members. As they listen to the people and make records of what is said and observed, students practice listening to themselves as well, and recording their thoughts in their ethnographic journals. Thus they are encouraged to listen or watch for signs of the spirit of God in the midst of their shared ministries.

This spiritual growth process starts from the very beginning of a pastoral research project, when students start looking for their topic or question that they want to pursue. It is important that the question chosen is one that has real meaning for the student. Sometimes the research question begins with a sense of "What's wrong with this church?" It is okay to begin with a question that is a little bit critical, because that is likely to be an honest question. And if the student/researcher can articulate the theology behind that question, so much the better. The process involves paying attention –both inwardly toward one's own

longing and sense of call—and outwardly—toward the congregation one is serving.

The student's spiritual growth comes about through practices of theological reflection and prayer that are built into the research process. In studying the group's religious practices as well as its art and artifacts, the researcher is constantly reflecting on where the life of the spirit is made manifest in this place. In trying to see more deeply into what is actually happening in the ritual and spontaneous life of the group, the researcher is opened to new understanding of the people, their faith, and their sense of calling. Writing about these experiences in the ethnographic journal requires researchers to think more deeply about their own responses to what they are observing and learning.[6] The spiritual life of the researcher is often stirred as he or she encounters the particular vision and hopes of the people in this new and more attentive way. This is exactly the kind of renewal that Doctor of Ministry students long for and need—a new way to see the holy in the midst of their mundane ministries, and a shift toward greater self-awareness in the process.

Liminality and Leadership

Religious leaders occupy a kind of liminal social space that is suitable for the role of pastoral ethnographer.[7] As has been noted by those who apply family systems theory to congregational leadership, a good pastor is part of the congregation, but as its leader, must maintain a little bit of emotional distance, in

[6] For an explanation of ethnographic journal writing, see Moschella, 2008, 115–140.
[7] Frank, 2000, 82–83.

order to care for the life of the whole group. If the distance between pastor and people collapses entirely, the pastor becomes one of the gang—beloved, perhaps, but less able to lead with strength and clarity. If the emotional distance between a pastor and the people is too great, then the pastor seems aloof, and will not be trusted enough to lead with authority. Good pastors occupy an in-between space, a liminal or threshold space; they stand in the doorway between insider and outsider.

Engaging in ethnographic research helps a Doctor of Ministry student step back far enough from his or her ministry setting to be able see or read the group as a whole. The research also brings the student close in enough to hear the disparate voices of particular members, all the while listening for common themes and deep spiritual yearnings in a rigorous, respectful, and sustained way. Leaders can use ethnography to gain a better understanding of their faith communities, and as a way to identify and nurture theological dialogue and conversation in the group. This patient listening helps foster trust, growth, and empowerment. It also strengthens the pastoral leader's ability to work collaboratively towards spiritual and social transformation.

Pastoral ethnography can be undertaken in a wide array of settings, not just in local congregations. Doctor of ministry students have taken on such research projects with youth groups, denominational agencies, nursing home residents and staffs, retirement communities, hospice centers, theological schools, and college dormitories, among many others. The key is that the pastoral leader

is in some sense a member of the group, and in some sense a leader as well. The practice of listening to individual stories and then reflecting upon the life of the group as a whole helps the student think in a disciplined and comprehensive way about the group being served. The pastoral ethnographer can identify the strengths, talents, and potential contributions as well as some of the needs, lapses, and vulnerabilities of the institution. This kind of reflection and focus on the wellbeing, purpose, and calling of the faith community will benefit the congregation and enhance the student's capacity to lead.

Leading Toward Hope and Change

As students review and analyze their research findings, they are encouraged to ask such questions as, "Where is God in the story?" Even when studying a seemingly bleak community, such as a dying congregation or a mean-spirited one, they are asked to return to this question. It is a way of asking student researchers, "What do you see here of God?" or, "Where do you witness hope in this situation?" As students construct their narratives, then they are reaching toward the holy, and generating hope. As Herbert Anderson and Edward Foley put it, . . . "storytelling is an act of hope, and even defiance, because it carries within it the power to change."[8]

Even if the overarching story of a group's life is a troubling one, there is often a "counter-story" of protest or resistance to evil somewhere in that group's history or current life. Discovering that counter-story, and building upon it,

[8] Herbert Anderson and Edward Foley, *Mighty Stories, Dangerous Rituals: Weaving Together the Human and the Divine,* (San Francisco, Jossey-Bass, 1998), 12.

helps the pastoral leader forge links between the group's historical identity and its capacity to imagine its current purpose, the new direction in which the spirit calls.

Sharing Research Findings

Part of the vitality sparked in this process is due to the sharing back of research findings with the congregation. Once the student researcher completes the ethnographic study, and has cobbled together a thoughtful and detailed portrait of the group's life together, he or she is encouraged to share back at least a portion of the ethnography with the people in the group. The people get a chance to see what their pastoral leader has surmised. Of course, this sharing back must be done with humility and with respect for the ethical commitments made in the course of the research.

When the pastoral researcher offers his or her findings back to the community in a respectful and appreciative manner, the group members learn a little bit about how their faith looks from the outside. They might become more conscious of their *lived* faith practices and the messages that their habits and actions proclaim to the world. Likewise, the people may challenge or correct the ethnographic portrait that the pastoral leader has offered. If the researcher is open to deeper layers of honest dialogue, the core values and faith commitments of the congregation will be revealed, spoken out loud. The people are thus invited into a theological conversation, a conversation that is energized because it is based on the group's own stories and beliefs, both explicit and enacted.

This kind of conversation informs and motivates a group's "theology-in-action,"[9] its way of living out theological commitments in the world. It sets the stage for more prophetic ministries, such as practices of radical hospitality or social or environmental advocacy. A faith community that is reflective and aware of itself, its history and its current faith practices, is more likely to thoughtfully consider its call to engage in praxis-oriented work in the world.

This is the hope of pastoral ethnography, that religious leaders and their communities of faith will become better able to live into new practices, practices that transform and are transformed by God. Pastoral theologian Elaine Graham writes:

> My vision of pastoral theology portrays it as the systematic reflection upon the nature of the Church in the world, accessible only through the practical wisdom of those very communities. Therefore, as a discipline, pastoral theology is not legislative or prescriptive, but interpretive. It enables the community of faith to give a critical and public account of its purposeful presence in the world, and the values that give shape to its actions.[10]

Pastoral ethnography is a process that helps uncover the practical wisdom of local faith communities, and prompt them to move forward with a "purposeful presence in the world." Understanding the values and theology that "give shape to its actions," a community is better able to move toward life-giving change.

Pastoral ethnography is a subject well suited to Doctor of Ministry education.

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[9] Elaine Graham, Heather Walton, and Frances Ward, *Theological Reflection: Methods,* (London: SCM Press, 2005), 170–199.
[10] Elaine Graham, *Transforming Practice: Pastoral Theology in an Age of Uncertainty,* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2002), 208-9.

Students who learn it will be well equipped, not only to conduct research studies for their Doctor of Ministry thesis projects, but also to engage in ministry with a new way of listening—listening to the people they serve, listening to themselves, and listening for God. Learning this process facilitates the spiritual renewal of both the students and the faith communities they serve. This approach to pastoral leadership enables students to remember and reclaim the prophetic dimensions of their call to the ministry. At the same time, pastoral ethnography gives them a means to move forward purposefully *with* their faith communities, toward paths of more just and life-giving action in and for the world.

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