Why does 'academic' theology disable ministry?

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Abstract

Dissatisfaction about the 'academic' nature of ministerial training has existed for a considerable time. In a small-scale qualitative study of ministers in the Anglican Diocese of Oxford, England, it emerged that most if not all had experienced a disconnect between their academic study and the realities of ministry and had found the study of academic theology disabling for ministry. This article uses the framework of learning in communities of practice to explore their experience. It concludes that the disconnect stems from the subject-centred nature of theological scholarship in contrast to the life-centred concerns of discipleship and ministry. The interests of academic theologians frequently do not tally with those of ministers and the nature of academic theology differs from that of the 'everyday' theology that forms a component of a Christian social imaginary. The signature pedagogy required for ministerial formation is a pedagogy of theological reflection rather than theological scholarship.

Keywords: academic theology, communities of practice, whole-life discipleship, pastoral imagination, signature pedagogies

'Much of the dissatisfaction that currently exists comes from the belief that present patterns of training are either too academic or at least are too influenced by university models.' So spoke Archbishop Robert Runcie in an address given in Great St Mary's, Cambridge in 1986. The significance of this, one of many similar expressions of dissatisfaction, lies in the fact that the Archbishop was himself the former principal of a theological college and that an extract from his address was used the following year as the Preface to a major report on the state of ministerial training in the Church of England (ACCM 1987, 7-9). Neither the Archbishop nor the subsequent report, however, was able to define satisfactorily what is meant by labelling a course of learning as 'too academic' nor precisely why an 'academic' approach to theology should be seen as a disadvantage for students preparing for ordained ministry.

In 2019, the Anglican Diocese of Oxford carried out a small-scale piece of research with the question, 'What equips ministerial trainees to enable whole-life disciples?' Two years previously, the report *Setting God's People Free* emphasised the importance of 'empowering' and 'liberating' ordinary Christian disciples for, 'fruitful, faithful mission and ministry, influence [and] leadership … in all of life' (Archbishops' Council 2017, 1). The purpose of the research was to discover whether their training was equipping women and men preparing for licensed or ordained ministry to empower the church in this way.[1] One of the findings was that, far from equipping them, the study of academic theology was proving an obstacle to the enabling style of ministry the authors of *Setting God's People Free* had called for.

The research had three strands. 43 lay ministers and 33 curates (ordained ministers in their first three years of ordained ministry) completed a questionnaire designed to discover the factors that had most helped them to become enablers of lay discipleship and those that hindered them. 12 of the lay ministers and 12 curates accepted the invitation to join one of four focus groups for semi-

structured conversations designed to explore the outcome of the questionnaires. Of the curates, three were self-supporting and nine stipendiary. In addition, seven representatives of the five training institutions situated in the diocese took part in semi-structured interviews through which the views of theological educators could be explored.

The members of the focus groups could not be said to be representative of either the Church of England as a whole or of English society. All were white, ten male and fourteen female, and all except the younger stipendiary curates, over 50. Moreover, they formed a self-selecting group, all strongly committed to making enabling lay discipleship a part of their ministry. On the other hand, they brought to the discussions a considerable degree of experience and expertise: in primary, secondary and higher education; healthcare; business and finance; farming and military service.

Most significantly, their negative experience and evaluation of 'academic' theology emerged spontaneously in the conversations of all four focus groups. In each group, a question about the connection between life and theology led first to a discussion of theological reflection and it was in this context that scepticism arose about the value of the theology they had been taught. The following quotes are typical:

> I've found the training has actually sometimes made me feel less qualified rather than more so, because it makes you aware of how much you don't know … and it doesn't always seem to value the thirty-odd years of experience I've had leading Bible studies, leading the services, whatever…

> I was coming at it from the point of view of someone who's late to her first degree and is now serving in a parish where twenty five percent of the working age population have no academic formal qualifications … I'm aware that when I use complicated vocabulary – because I've just come out of theological college and that's what I've been trained to do in essays – that I'm speaking in a language that has vocabulary that they just don't understand. So, I have been mentored through three years of: use more complicated language; get your sentence structure right, you know, … and I'm speaking to a bunch of people who don't know what I'm saying anymore. I've been over-educated to connect with my population …

> I suddenly found I was reading books with words in it that I didn't understand, and having to extend my vocabulary and sometimes felt like you were being … I mean, OK, the people that taught us are probably ministering in parishes, but they seem to be more in their books and in what the Greek and Hebrew said, or what some guy with a German name said … You know, it was books, books, more books, dons and ivory towers; that's what I mean by academic, and I thought … I would have said I was more academic than not before I started and discovered, I'm not really, compared to … some Anglican circles …

What, then, does 'academic' theology mean for these ministers, and why have they found it disabling for ministry? In exploring this question, we will, of course, be treading ground familiar to practical theologians about the relationship of theory to practice, but in this instance too, the nature of learning and how it relates to the tasks of ministry.

'Tourists' and 'sojourners'

The theory of learning in communities of practice provides an appropriate framework for interpreting their experience. Ministerial trainees are in the process of moving from one community of practice to another: from the practice of Christian discipleship to the closely related practice of Christian ministry. In the course of this transition, they encounter another community: that of

theological scholarship. The Oxford research suggests that, for these ministers at least, the effect of that encounter has been disruptive rather than enabling.

An analogous piece of research throws further light on what may be happening. Mark Fenton-O'Creevy and his colleagues report a qualitative study of a group of healthcare support workers training to become nurses (Fenton-O'Creevy *et. al.* 2015). Though their training was largely based in the workplace, the required qualification was a module in Health and Social Care shared with other students working in similar areas. Through studying for this module, students were introduced to a body of knowledge including frameworks and ideas derived from the scientific disciplines. Typically, students valued this 'book learning' only to the extent that it could be seen to be related to caring for patients. 'In their essays, they had to express their competence through describing, comparing and contrasting models of care, rather than enacting these in the workplace. This did not fit with their emerging identities as a nurse, whom they saw as a carer and a doer rather than as an abstract thinker' (48).

The research team were able to distinguish three types of response to the encounter with the requirements of the academy. A very small number of students choose a trajectory that took them to the heart of the academic community in the form of further study and higher qualifications. Some become 'sojourners': they were content to commit to academic standards and practices for the purposes of training though their ultimate destination lay in the practice of nursing. A third group the researchers described as 'tourists': 'they engage superficially in the academic practices but with no commitment to an academic identity and no engagement with the meaning of these practices' (46).

A similar typology emerges from the focus group discussions. Some had been 'sojourners':

> I loved it when I was doing IME 1 (initial training for ministry); I enjoyed poring over books in the library and finding quotes and saying, oh that matches with that, and ooh, that relates to that, and that webbing of lots of … different parts of theology and how they all sparked off one another …

> Some of the books … that I've read have been highly academic and some have been, you know, very popular and I'd find it difficult to say which I've found most useful, because … it's the mix of thinking deeply, and academically, and thinking very, very practically …

While others were clearly 'tourists':

> At college level, it was very much book-reading and theoretical, but it didn't always … give you an idea of what would be a good thing to do when you actually spoke to someone …

> … a lot of the time we're thinking, this isn't really helping us for what we're actually going to be doing … what you're teaching us isn't actually what we're going to use …

> I must admit I did find LLM (local lay minister) training quite disappointing on the practical side, and I did find … that I've gained most of my knowledge through the university of life.

From the point of view of the academic community, it would be easy to label the tourists as poor students, and in fact two of the theological educators interviewed for the research complained about what they saw as 'anti-intellectualism'. The academic ideal is that students develop intrinsic motivation for the subject-matter of their course (Biggs and Tang 2011, 36-37). These students demonstrate no such motivation. But this is because their intrinsic motivation and developing sense of identity lies in a different direction: towards becoming effective ministers. Their encounter with

the academic community of practice in their course of training is an example of 'legitimate peripheral participation' (Lave and Wenger 1991) but with a difference. In relation to the ministerial community of practice, they are apprentices, working towards competence in the practice. In relation to the academic community, their participation will only ever be peripheral. Its value will be the extent to which it equips them for the practice of ministry. Comments reflecting this state of affairs abound in the focus group discussions:

> We all have to have an understanding of theology, obviously, and the Bible, and I do accept that, but I think a lot of the training could be considered to be very academic in comparison with some of the more practical things, and a lot of people in training prefer the practical stuff to the theoretical stuff.

> I actually believe it would be helpful across the whole training … instead of all the academic stuff, which, yeah, is important – some of it – is actually to do some practical things … for all of us who learn that way …

> Maybe when I get out the other side of this then I will find some useful books that I can read that will connect me with my situation but through this last three and a half years it's been so many books to read that are useful for writing essays but maybe not for anything else.

There is an obvious tension emerging in the ministers' comments. On the one hand, they recognise the potential value of academic learning to deepen their understanding of the Bible and Christian tradition. On the other, they experience a disconnect between the way these areas are dealt with in the academic context and the requirements of the ministry context, which is their ultimate goal.

Discipleship, ministry, scholarship

Christian ministry places its practitioners at the intersection of three separate though related practices, which it would be as well to examine in greater detail. The first is Christian discipleship, the practice of living a 'Christian life'. *Setting God's People Free* sought to draw the attention of the Church of England to its failure to value this practice highly enough, declaring that the health of the Church depends on the ability of lay Christians to live out their faith, 'in work and school, in gym and shop, in field and factory, Monday to Saturday' (Archbishops' Council 2017, 1).

Learning Christian faith is a process of 'enculturation': learning a way of life in and through participation in the Christian community in a gradual and piecemeal way through a myriad different social interactions, such as sharing in worship, instruction, stories, decision-making and service together (Martin 1994). The outcome is what philosopher Charles Taylor has called a 'social imaginary', a 'largely unstructured' and socially held understanding of the way things are and ought to be: an 'implicit grasp of social space' supported by a 'repertory of collective actions' (Taylor 2007, 171-6). A Christian social imaginary includes the doctrines of Christianity as reference points, but these are embedded in dispositions. In fact, without the dispositions – such as to love and worship God, oppose evil and injustice, care for one's neighbours, take little thought for tomorrow, be joyful in tribulation – the concepts involved can hardly be said to have been understood.

A piece of research carried out in the English West Midlands in 2014 adds further detail to the activities through which Christian discipleship develops. Given a list of over 30 activities that might be found helpful in encouraging discipleship, over 50% of the 1,191 participants affirmed between 14 and 28 of these, with the average being 20. The scoring for these activities indicated that they could be grouped with a high degree of correlation into four pathways:

- 'Church Worship', including such activities as attending worship, participating in communion and the seasons and shape of the Christian year
- 'Group Activity', including small groups, Christian courses and conferences and 'taking part in my church's outreach'
- 'Public Engagement', which included taking part in online conversations, social justice campaigning beyond the church, Christian practical service and mission beyond the church, and conversation with others whose faith and beliefs are different
- 'Individual Experience', which included listening to sermons, praying and reading the Bible on one's own, a spiritual director or mentor, and 'trying to put my faith into practice in daily life'.

Further study on these apparent pathways confirmed their significance and further confirmed that 'Individual Christian Experience' was the most effective pathway for growth in discipleship (Francis *et. al.* 2019). The findings were echoed by the Oxford research, which found that prayer, Bible study and spiritual reading were the most helpful factors in equipping whole-life discipleship or 'everyday faith' (Heywood 2021, 8-9).

If discipleship is the starting point of the journey of ministerial formation, then the practice of Christian ministry is the destination. As discipleship is undergirded by a social imaginary, ministry is resourced by what Craig Dykstra has called 'pastoral imagination' (Dykstra 2008). Dykstra points to four elements in pastoral imagination:

- the minister's understanding of Scripture and theology and their ability to interpret and draw from them in the contexts of everyday life
- the minister's emotional intelligence, leading to 'an accurate sense of what makes human beings tick', which equips them for the task of enabling and encouraging individual discipleship
- 'a complex understanding of how congregations and other institutions actually work' and the ability that flows from this to shape the life of the church as both a worshipping and a mission community
- an ability to understand the wider society, the world the church exists to serve and the context in which mission and ministry take place.

This bare description of the areas of understanding that contribute to pastoral imagination leaves to one side the dispositional aspect: the minister's vision of what ministry is *for.* Crucial to the way the minister formulates her ministerial goals will be the way she envisions the relationship between the church and the wider society in which it is set; and secondly, the relationship between clergy and laity. For the Oxford researchers, the purpose of ministry is to empower and release each church member to witness to the kingdom of God through their lives and actions in every sphere of life, including through engagement between their congregation and the wider community.

On the journey of transition from the practice of discipleship to that of ministry, candidates encounter a third practice: that of theological scholarship. Mike Higton has written eloquently about the role of universities and the potential benefits of the involvement of the university sector in the training of ministers. The ideal he presents is of scholarship as a conversation whose twin purposes are the promotion of individual virtue and the common good. Through studying for their degree, students learn the attitudes and ways of thought involved in making well-grounded judgements and submitting these to the judgement of others. To do this, they need to learn and practice specific intellectual virtues, including integrity, attentiveness, patience, humility and openness to the

unexpected (2012, 190-95). By means of this process, universities become, 'communities of training in virtuous perception' (2013, 31).

Sources of disconnect

Ideally, then, the minister is introduced to the study of Scripture and Christian tradition through the study of academic theology and completes their training equipped to draw on these resources to enable Christian discipleship. However, several factors prevent the realization of this ideal. In the first place, developing the intellectual virtues associated with academic study requires students to embrace the *intrinsic* rewards that come with immersion in their chosen subject area: they need to be studying it *for its own sake.* As Higton concedes, the commodification of higher education means that the pressures on students to look to the *extrinsic* rewards of studying for a degree are considerable. But even if this were not the case, the purposes candidates for ministry bring with them are life- rather than subject-centred. Their goal is Christian ministry rather than immersion in the theological curriculum for its own sake. Moreover, the virtues developed through a university education, while undoubtedly valuable in themselves, are not as extensive as those required for the practice of ministry. Acquisition of these requires processes of formation specifically tailored to the pursuit of ministry rather than derived at second-hand from a related but different practice (Heywood 2013).

Secondly, the concerns of the subject-centred discipline of the academy may not overlap with those that emerge from everyday life. Kathryn Tanner writes of the way academic theology as the 'productions of educated elites' can seem irrelevant to the everyday concerns of Christian people (1997, 69), as some of the Oxford ministers were finding:

> I do a YouTube channel – involves discipleship – and I look at and research a lot of questions that people are asking – of Christians, or Christians are asking – and I make videos about them. And yet all of those questions that you can easily find in a Google search, we don't address at church … And that's why I say there's a disconnect; we're teaching from the Bible, but they're going: well, my friend's asking this question. You haven't equipped me … We are theologically speaking about some amazing things and pulling stuff out, like, Paul said this, and this is how we live our lives, and a lot of people go, yeah, but Mark asked me a question yesterday and I can't answer it, and it's so disconnected.

Thirdly, not only may the interests of academic theology not be those of everyday discipleship but the way that academic theology works is significantly different from disciples' everyday theology. Donald Schön has contrasted the 'high, hard ground' of intellectual enquiry, where 'manageable problems lend themselves to solution through the application of research-based theory and technique' with the 'swampy lowland' where 'messy, confusing questions defy technical solution' (1987, 3). Everyday Christian practice, from the way altars and pews are arranged to the practical concern of loving one's neighbour as oneself, is suffused with theology. But, writes Tanner, it is the theology of the everyday, a pragmatic theology not requiring definition. 'The ambiguities, inconsistencies and open-endedness of … Christian practices help to sustain a Christian way of life in a complex, conflictual, and unpredictable world.' Nevertheless, Tanner continues, ambiguous and unexamined assumptions can only take the Christian so far. In situations of conflict and uncertainty, it is often necessary to, 'figure out the meaning of what one has been doing, why one does it and what it implies – in particular, how it hangs together (or fails to hang together) with the rest of what one believes and does' (2008, 232).[2]

In other words, the intention to live out the Christian life as best they can in the spheres of everyday life will mean that disciples regularly encounter challenges and conflicts with a theological dimension. At this point, they will need help to access the work of those who have given time to in-depth study and conversation about the matter in hand. Very often, this will mean the work of academic theologians (though not always since the academy tends to neglect some topics of vital importance to Christian practice). The ability to come to the aid of ordinary disciples in these situations, to 'empower' disciples for, 'fruitful, faithful, mission and ministry … in all of life,' is integral to the practice of ministry. Yet the members of the Oxford focus groups had discovered in experience that the two practices, everyday discipleship and theological scholarship, were often at some distance from one another:

> It's a kind of mode of discourse, basically … a mode of communication … that might be very helpful for us in a certain situation, but perhaps in everyday parish life it's not the way we should communicate with the people around us …

> I think it can get lost for the laity, in the sense of, theological study is something that either clergy do, or is something that you do academically … They do kind of think theologically, but it's kind of broken up and we don't really help them understand that, and it can seem quite abstract to them as well …

> What if you've got a church of people, that really are not used to thinking about things in a God-framework at all? I think it would be a very helpful thing for us to learn to do a bit more … in order to help them move on to think, well what are we doing here? Why are we doing this church? Why are we doing this small group? What are we doing in this PCC (Parochial Church Council)? That would be a useful part of training, I think, not just how do you reflect personally, theologically, but how can you reflect in a group of people …

What these participants are moving toward is a concept of the minister as someone with the ability to equip the church with the skills of theological reflection. Laurie Green refers to this role as the 'people's theologian', 'whose task is to provide appropriate learning exercises and opportunities for the group members to take up their responsibilities and make their own decisions.' Such people need to be steeped in the Christian tradition but act as servants of the tradition rather than controllers. Their task is to 'give the work to the people' in a way that liberates and empowers them. (2009, 134-6).

The primacy of reflection

How then are ministers to be 'steeped in the tradition' in such a way as to be equipped to offer it as a resource to Christians engaged in the struggle to live authentic Christian lives in the spheres of everyday life? In the United States, Christian Scharen and Eileen Campbell-Reed have been conducting a detailed study of the way in which ministers learn pastoral imagination (Scharen and Campbell-Reid 2016). At the five-year stage of the study, some significant findings emerged:

1. The practice for which ministers are being prepared needs to be kept in view at every stage of formation. A focus on abstract, decontextualised knowledge does not equip ministers to draw on Scripture and theology to resource practice.
2. Students and ministers are most helped by teachers and mentors who encourage them to integrate their understanding of Scripture and theology with real-life situations. Most of these will be experienced practitioners with skills of teaching or supervision. If students are

to be taught by academic specialists, academic learning must be related to practice. They are not helped when the horizon in view is the purely scholarly pursuit of learning.

3. Pastoral imagination develops through a process of reflection over the long haul, punctuated by moments of crisis in which transformative learning takes place. Ministerial formation therefore needs to equip students to make theological reflection part of their habitual practice, whether through formal or informal methods.

These findings would appear to legitimate the desire of the Oxford ministers for a greater emphasis on practice in their training and confirm their sense of a disconnect between academic scholarship and the purpose of formation. They also confirm an emerging sense of the primacy of theological reflection over theological scholarship.

I think one of the things that really came out of our lay ministry training was actually, that theology is just … making a relationship between our faith and whatever it is we're doing … And it's something that I think, within the Church of England, possibly we're not very good at doing …

(A) I don't believe you need a great deal of theological knowledge to shine as a light in the world …
(researcher) That's defining theology as knowledge.
(B) Yeah, but I think a lot of people do …
(C) We've been knowledged …
(B) We've been knowledged, so we've come at it from the inside, but quite often members of the congregation will say … I feel I need more confidence …
(A) I agree with you, and if we change theology to theological reflection … all you need is the freedom, the courage to engage with scripture and to engage with the environment you find around you and make sense of that. And in some circumstances having read books yay-thick on theology can help, but not necessarily; sometimes it can hinder. But what I think you do need – it's the freedom of mind, flexibility of mind, to be able to engage with things that are not familiar to you.

I wrote my final short dissertation on the use of image and art in theological reflection … Personally, I'm dyslexic and the work that I did during my ordination training – working three days a week with children and youth in a parish – meant that I was doing things like Messy Church, and doing theological reflection in a service, with the children, and making things visual made them more influential for that group. So, I think the practical application … I think the endless essays on, how do you theologically reflect – the volume of them – I think it would be lovely to have some kind of tangible, experiential practice … and some exploration of using theological reflection in groups, rather than solo essays, so that that's preparing your practice of theological reflection for use within a corporate worshipping context.

Conclusion: A pedagogy of theological reflection

We have been reflecting on one of the outcomes of a small-scale piece of qualitative research carried out in the diocese of Oxford with a fairly homogeneous but articulate group of ordained and lay ministers, each of whom was able to draw on considerable experience of everyday Christian discipleship in a variety of spheres as well as experience of ministry. The group had been asked what in their experience had most equipped them as enablers of lay discipleship. In focus groups,

convened to follow up their responses, it emerged spontaneously that exposure to the 'academic' study of theology during their training had been a disabling factor for most if not all of them.

By placing the findings in a framework of learning in communities of practice, it is possible to throw some light on the dissatisfaction expressed. Exposure to academic theology during training is an example of what Lave and Wenger have called 'legitimate peripheral participation'. Candidates relate to the study of theology as 'tourists' or 'sojourners' and only rarely as full initiates into the practice. They therefore fail to receive the full benefit of their study. Moreover, as a subject-centred discipline, academic theology has different interests and a different character from the life-centred 'everyday' theology which is a component of Christian disciples' 'social imaginaries'. Ministers therefore experience a disconnect that hinders them from making connections between everyday experience and Scripture or Christian tradition.

The solution appears to lie in the area that researchers in the United States have labelled 'signature pedagogies' (Foster *et. al.* 2006, 30-37). Emerging gradually and tentatively from the discussions is a desire for a pedagogy of theological *reflection* rather than theological scholarship, an approach to teaching and learning in which theological reflection (TR) is understood as *the way in which theology is learned* rather than merely as an exercise through which to relate the content of academic theology to life and ministry (Heywood 2013, 16-22; 2021, 72-82).

The possibility of a pedagogical approach in which TR is seen as the 'anchor' that 'pervades' or 'imbues the whole curriculum' emerges from interviews with four of the seven theological educators, which formed another strand of the research. In these interviews, all seven were able to articulate an espoused theology of everyday faith. All agreed that TR is the primary means by which connections are made between faith and everyday life and most observed that TR needs to become a 'the habit of a lifetime' rather than an academic exercise. But institutions varied in the extent to which these beliefs affected the shape of the curriculum. In some, the assumption appeared to be that 'academic' learning translates smoothly into Christian practice, whereas four of the educators representing three institutions saw this as far from inevitable and sought to address the transition.

In one perceptive comment, the emphasis on TR meant creating more time for thinking about the 'So what?' questions implicit in Christian theology:

> Brexit, climate change, sex trafficking, the stuff that people care about … Because we don't do the 'So what?' question, it remains at a very esoteric level.

Others were able to point to ways in which space was created in the curriculum to train candidates' ability to reflect on the issues they encountered in fieldwork or everyday life. In one institution, where all the students are part-time, all student assignments are related to the context in which they were currently ministering. In another, as well as formal methods of TR such as the pastoral cycle, these included autobiography, spiritual practices such as the examen, the use of the arts, walking meditations and other creative activities. In all three of these institutions, whole sessions or even whole days would be given to the exploration of an issue or situation, with TR an integral element. By asking students to bring an issue to work through in a group,

> we're modelling for them how you could use it in a parish situation, asking all the critical questions as we go … the whole pedagogical context, you learn by doing it … it's adding steroids to the teaching, so that they inhabit it a lot quicker and … it becomes more part of who they are …

> The end is … developing habits, it's like going to the gym, you need to practice it …

From the student point of view, this kind of exposure breaks down the disconnect between theology and the world of the everyday. In fact, in the observation of some educators, this may come as a surprise, especially for students with previous training in purely academic theology.

> The idea that *you* might have a theological voice is quite … wow, you mean I don't just quote Barth? The idea that it's about your relationship with God affecting your understanding of who God is … that's quite a stretch for those folks.

One of the obstacles to this approach lies in the demands of the denomination for a certain set of outcomes. As one of the educators said, 'This stuff is not neat take-homes.' But perhaps, precisely because it connects theology with the messiness of everyday life, equipping students to relate the theology of the 'high ground' with the 'swampy lowlands' of everyday life, the 'take-homes' involved in making reflection a habit of life should figure as key learning outcomes and form the core of the curriculum.

1. The research was carried out by Dr Nigel Rooms with the assistance of Joel Denno. The full findings are summarised in Heywood, *Reimagining Ministerial Formation*, pages 7-14.

2. The point made here about the differing structure of theory and practice is also made in a review of Higton's *The Life of Christian Doctrine* by Elaine Graham (2021).

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