

A Mentored Practice Approach to Bivocational Ministry Education

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The church in the twenty-first century is changing, and thus the way it educates and forms ministers is also changing. Due to decreased attendance, the culture of church and ministry has shifted in parishes of the United Church of Christ (UCC) in northern New England (Maine, New Hampshire, and Vermont). Many—if not most—small churches can no longer afford to employ a full-time minister with a Master of Divinity degree from an accredited theological seminary. Consequently, many clergy serving small churches in our region are bivocational or even multivocational, holding two or more jobs simultaneously, where one job is a church ministry position and the other a secular employment of some kind. This way of working in ministry is as old as the Apostle Paul, who supported himself as a “tentmaker” while engaging in his apostolic and ministry endeavors (Acts 18:1–3, NRSV). Furthermore, prospective clergy are seeking alternatives to seminary for ministerial formation. The

Maine School of Ministry—a regional theological educational program of the Maine Conference United Church of Christ—provides one such path.

To nurture the gift to the wider church that is unique to bivocational ministry, the Maine School of Ministry utilizes both academic study in a classroom context as well as a “mentored practice” approach to formation and preparation for ordained leadership. A mentored practice experience provides the benefit of increasing competence and confidence on the part of the pastoral intern in the “doing” of ministry in a parish ministry setting. The mentored practice approach counts on the accrued wisdom of life experience of the student pastor, or pastoral intern,¹ as a critical factor as they experience the great joy of doing ministry with and for others in a real context, including preaching, teaching, providing spiritual guidance, and working for justice in various settings. To observe the increase in competence across a semester of experiential learning is a thing of beauty. It is very fulfilling for the pastoral intern as well as for the congregants of their teaching church committee and for the mentor-pastor.

Important ministerial and pastoral education and formation occurs through the mentored practice experience, a type of apprenticeship. William Sullivan, in his *Introduction to Educating Clergy: Teaching Practices and Pastoral Imagination*, wrote of the importance of the apprenticeship model:

Future clergy do a good deal of their preparation learning in classrooms, reading and studying texts and being assessed. . . . Still . . . educators of clergy generally work hard and creatively at linking this cognitive or intellectual apprenticeship with the demands of future clergy practice. (Sullivan 2006, 7)

In terms of preparation and study for pastoral ministry, this approach requires “integration”—classroom work in church history, systematic theology, ethics, biblical studies, and pastoral studies all come together in the practice of embodied ministry in a particular context. Sullivan described the way seminaries teach this integration as “the second apprenticeship,”

in which students learn by engaging in the actual activities of clergy practice. Simulations, case studies, field placements, and clinical pastoral education are common . . . the skills developed in the apprentice-

ship of practice . . . are the essential completion and complement of the cognitive capacities developed in the intellectual apprenticeship. (Sullivan 2006, 7)

Thus, integration happens when the student minister practices the art of ministry joyfully in a setting that demands their all. It happens when, in a given instance of ministry, a student truly sees the various dimensions of academic study reflected in the act of ministry. The Maine School of Ministry provides integration through a mentored practice approach. For bivocational ministry students in particular, the mentored practice approach to formation provides deep personal and professional integration, as well as wisdom, through service in the church as a parish pastor.

This chapter discusses some of the strengths of a mentored practice approach to the formation and education of prospective UCC ministers in Maine. I write as the dean of the Maine School of Ministry—a role in which I help to educate bivocational candidates for ministry. I begin with a brief synopsis of the current context of church and ministry in the state of Maine. I then provide a short sketch of the recent and impactful closing of Bangor Theological Seminary, which served for nearly two centuries as the only accredited seminary in northern New England. The closure of this seminary affected ministry candidates as well as the congregations they served, particularly those congregations dependent on student ministers. Responding to this need, the Maine School of Ministry provided a new context for both the academic study necessary to ministry education and formation and a mentored practice approach, illustrated by two extended case studies. I believe the gifts and graces of the bivocational pastor for ministry are best developed through an acknowledgement of their accrued life wisdom and brought to full fruition through mentored practice.

The Context of Church and Ministry in Maine

Since the case studies presented in this chapter are set in Maine churches, it is important to provide some contextual background and analysis on the unique features of this New England state. Viewed from within, some claim there are “two Maines,” by which they mean 1) greater southeastern Maine from Kittery to Portland

to Brunswick and westward towards the border with southern New Hampshire, and 2) inland, northern and “downeast” Maine. Actually, I have found it is far more accurate to talk of “three Maines,” the third being coastal Maine (Baard 2017, 143).

Coastal Maine has by far the most resources economically. In recent decades, more and more persons of means from out of state have bought land parcels up and down the midcoast of Maine (as well as other parts of Maine) and farther north, up the coast of Maine, thus driving up real estate values. This dynamic makes it harder for “real Mainers” to keep up with property taxes and the general cost of living. Inland, northern and “downeast” Maine present another picture, one that is more rural and agricultural, characterized by diminished resources and a slower economy. Maine is still over 90% forest, and the economics of the lumber business in this huge geographic region go up and down. Thus, the economies of many northern Maine communities follow in the wake. In some counties in northern Maine, the regional dynamics are similar to small communities in Appalachia. Portland and southern Maine provide yet another picture, for they share in the energy and vitality of the economy of Boston, northern Massachusetts, and southern New Hampshire, where the culture tends to be much more cosmopolitan and urban (Baard 2017, 143–44).

The churches in this Maine context differ widely. Larger churches are located in Bangor, Brunswick, and Portland, as well as on the coast in Camden and Bar Harbor. Small and very small churches are alive in every other nook and cranny across the Maine landscape, many in fairly isolated areas. Fully two-thirds of churches in the Maine Conference of the United Church of Christ are small (defined as 50 members or less) or very small (defined as 15 to 20 members or active participants—often less). This fact is directly related to the geography of the state of Maine, which is so richly varied. It is primarily these smaller churches that are ideally suited for participation in the mentored practice program. Many of these small churches require the utilization of an off-site mentor-pastor to fulfill the mentoring needs of the pastoral intern serving them. This means, especially in the era of COVID-19, that most of the mentoring meetings are accomplished virtually and remotely through use of online platforms like Zoom.

The Closing of Bangor Theological Seminary and the Opening of the Maine School of Ministry

Bangor Theological Seminary closed its doors in June of 2013, after 199 years of admirable service in the work of forming and educating ministers for service in the parishes of Maine and northern New England and beyond. Bangor Theological Seminary was one of seven closely related seminaries of the United Church of Christ. It held its final graduation service in June of 2013. The closing of the seminary was painful for all involved. The grief for everyone, including staff, students, alumni(ae), faculty, and board members was immense. The tradition of providing theological students to serve as student pastors to small churches across the region was, in many respects, a mainstay of the identity and mission-driven esteem of the seminary. Thus, for decades in the twentieth century and into the twenty-first century, this mutually beneficial relationship of service-driven contextual education enhanced the life of students, the seminary, and the parishes they served.

In his anecdotal, reflective, and eminently practical account of his work as director of field education from an earlier period in the life of Bangor Theological Seminary, Walter Cook—a predecessor to my current work with the mentored practice program—wrote of how important and powerful the formation of pastoral identity was for both the student ministers and for the sense of mission these teaching churches lived into.

For I often see how much faithful lay people can do to help a pastor. When a student learns he [sic] can count always on the labor, friendship, counsel and prayers of a dozen staunch church members he [sic] can become a real power for God. (Cook 1978, 152)

The churches in northern New England experienced a vacuum with respect to the closing of their seminary. Over the years, these churches formed a strong sense of mission and identity around “forming” theological students who served as student pastors while completing their formal theological education at the seminary.

The loss of a role or of one's accustomed place in a social network is experienced as role loss. The significance of the role loss to an individual is

directly related to the extent to which one's sense of identity is linked to the lost role. (Mitchell and Andersen 1983, 42, original emphasis)

Systemic loss is a concept that forced itself upon us as we studied what our informants told us. To understand it, we must first recall that human beings usually belong to some interactional system in which patterns of behavior develop over time . . . When those functions disappear or are not performed, the system as a whole, as well as its individual members may experience systemic loss. (Mitchell and Andersen 1983, 44–45, original emphasis)

In addition to providing worship and faith-deepening opportunities to their members and friends in the community, these congregations understood a major part of their identity for mission and service to be in the loving, nurturing, and teaching relationships formed with their student pastors. When the seminary closed, this was a huge and sudden loss for many small churches across the landscape, resulting in significant disorientation and grief.

The Maine School of Ministry—an educational program of the Maine Conference United Church of Christ—rose to fill the void that this systemic loss created.

Schools of ministry are cropping up and growing largely for the purpose of strengthening lay roles in congregations. In Maine, for instance, a void emerged in [2013] when Bangor Theological Seminary (BTS) closed due to the same declining enrollment dynamics that are challenging so many other freestanding institutions. With the BTS closure, northern New England was left with no mainline training ground for church leaders, but the void gave rise to something new. The Maine School of Ministry was founded by the Maine Conference of the UCC to provide low-cost training in specific areas for lay people and future clergy. (MacDonald 2020, 115)

The Maine School of Ministry is a regional school of ministry under the wider umbrella of the Maine Conference United Church of Christ. It was formed in the fall of 2013 in response to the closure of Bangor Theological Seminary, and it held its first classes in 2014. It offers various certificate programs for ministry education and formation, as well as continuing education events for clergy and laypersons.

Mentored Practice

The Mentored Practice Course—a form of field education or supervised ministry—provides experiential learning and constitutes one of the last steps in the formation and education process in the Christian Studies and Pastoral Leadership certificate program offered by the Maine School of Ministry.

The mentored practice experiential learning process begins with the naming of clear learning goals for the pastoral intern, shaped in conversation with both their mentor-pastor and the church being served. This Learning Goals Covenant, completed together by the pastoral intern, mentor, and host congregation, specifies a commitment to one hour a week of mentoring conversation. The Covenant also includes a “teaching church committee” of three laypersons who meet with the pastoral intern several times during the semester for feedback and support. As the semester moves to completion, the student writes a thorough self-evaluation, the mentor writes an evaluation of the pastoral intern, and the teaching church committee works together to write a careful evaluation of the semester with their pastoral intern. The pastoral intern’s self-evaluation at the end of the term is a key source of learning in mentored practice.

Mentored practice, as it is expressed through the Maine School of Ministry, emphasizes the significant role of the mentor in the process of both education and formation. The word *mentor* comes from the character Mentor in Homer’s *Odyssey*. In that story, Mentor—a friend of the protagonist Odysseus—was entrusted with providing the education of Telemachus, Odysseus’s son (O’Donnell 2017). The role of the mentor involves both deep responsibility and the evocation of trust and goodwill in the mentoring relationship (see Fain, chapter 12 in this volume).

Mentors for student pastors are carefully selected. They need to have years of experience in congregational leadership and their skills in supervision must be well honed. The mentor-pastor’s commitment to their student’s growth means that they each spend an hour a week in conversation with their chosen pastoral intern. These mentoring conversations are intended to focus squarely on the pastoral intern’s professional development and professional practice for ministry. This is different from a focus on personal growth, such as might be accomplished in a therapeutic process, or a focus on spiritual growth, as would be the goal in spiritual direction. While it may

indeed happen that both personal and spiritual growth are evident in a pastoral intern's experiential learning in the mentoring process across a semester, in a sense they must be viewed as byproducts of their growth in professional practice (see Connelly, chapter 10 in this volume). A supportive infrastructure for the mentors, required as part of the overall program, consists of several gatherings of the participating mentor-pastors with the dean of the school for the purpose of support, accountability, and theological and spiritual reflection on the deeper meanings and impacts of the mentoring process.

The mentored practice program is illustrated here through the vocational journey stories of two different mid-life ministry students: Debbie and Travis.² Both of these students studied at the Maine School of Ministry in the Christian Studies and Pastoral Leadership curriculum for several years with the goal of becoming authorized ministers in the United Church of Christ. Both served as pastoral interns by engaging with a congregation in the Mentored Practice course. These case studies were chosen to illustrate the formative impact that the mentored practice approach to ministerial education and formation can have on the wider church in the twenty-first century, both in terms of its impact on student ministers and on the congregations they serve in their supervised ministry practice.

Formed as a people of mercy

The case of Debbie at Inland Lake UCC, located in a rural yet recreational area of Maine, illustrates how a mentored practice context and experience can serve as an educational vehicle for both the pastoral intern and the teaching church in which they are practicing ministry. This case emphasizes the essential components of empathy and compassion that are alive between the pastoral intern, the mentor-pastor, and the teaching congregation. In this case study, the congregation itself was transformed in its engagement with their pastoral intern as their hearts were turned toward mercy, empathy, and compassion.

A bivocational ministry student in her mid-50s, Debbie worked for many years as a fitness coach and trainer at a local branch of the YWCA USA, Inc., with a special interest in the health and well-being of senior citizens. She felt a call to serve in ministry over many years and began taking classes at the Maine School of Ministry from its inception. She completed many semesters of required courses, includ-

ing two semesters of Mentored Practice at this small church in rural Maine.

Working with her mentor (who was also the congregation's pastor), Debbie named three learning goals: "1) Learn how to use technology as a tool for ministry; 2) Gain experience in church administration; and 3) Gain experience in developing children's ministry in a small church context." Quotations from Debbie's self-evaluation illuminate some of the struggles and highlights of the final semester of her mentored practice at Inland Lake UCC.

During the year-long mentored practice assignment, Debbie experienced health challenges that impacted her ministry. Debbie's work with the chairperson of the Christian education committee on behalf of the children was exemplary and creative. Her devotion to and learning in her third goal, to "gain experience in developing children's ministry in a small church context," came through clearly, despite her obstacles.

When I started the spring semester, I had some health challenges to deal with. But I was fortunate to have a wonderful and patient teacher, Pastor Carol, to help me through the semester. She was understanding and patient. She had me participate in the areas I was comfortable with, in small steps, retraining me in areas that used to be familiar. Without this support, it would have been difficult to finish this internship. Words cannot express my thanks and appreciation.

Her mentor-pastor began the work of interpreting to the congregation the nature of these struggles in the weekly church newsletter as well as from the pulpit. With this sort of leadership and encouragement from their pastor, the church community did not see Debbie as fungible because she was having some difficulty performing all assigned duties. Instead, this experience was formative for the congregation as they learned to live more deeply into becoming a people of mercy.

As she acknowledged, Debbie's health challenges, due to the lingering effects of an accident in the fall semester, were indeed significant and challenging for her ongoing ministry practice. In turn, these challenges raised the mentoring bar for her mentor-pastor and for the whole church.

During this semester, I continued to help develop the weekly Orders of Worship as I did in the fall semester. I also continued to put togeth-

er the weekly Children's Moments to coincide with the scripture that Sunday or with the lesson that the children received from Christian Education. I continued to record weekly audio Bible lessons and upload them to SoundCloud so the Christian Education Committee could email the lessons to the families. I enjoyed working with [the] chairperson of the Christian Education committee as we selected and put together the last seven weeks of lessons that finished out the school year on June 13th. I also kept in touch with the Sunday School children by sending them seed crosses and coloring pictures for Easter, and Certificates of Achievement with stickers for the end of the school year. The certificates were also sent to teachers and administration staff to let them know Pastor Carol and I appreciated their hard work during this past school year.

Debbie, her mentor, and her church rose to meet these challenges in a beautiful way, demonstrating Christian love and patience at each step of the journey.

Debbie's struggle with certain health challenges as she worked her way through each week of the mentored practice semesters became a focus for learning and growth both for her and for the Inland Lake UCC church members. While she learned increased patience and grace with herself in her desire to overcome her health obstacles, her mentoring and teaching church community was on the same learning curve, learning and re-learning the Christian faith practices of mercy, patience, empathy, perseverance, and compassion.

How does the work of pastoral/theological formation continue when health issues arise and interfere with the practice of ministry? What is the hidden curriculum at work here? In Micah 6:8 we learn of the biblical and prophetic imperative to "Do justice, love kindness, walk humbly" (Mic. 6:8). Both Debbie and the church members were stretched in all these ways of doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly as they navigated each turn in the road of mentoring and being mentored. Especially impressive in this case was Debbie's mentor's ability to guide both Debbie and the congregation through these challenging turns. Frequently in the weekly church newsletter, the pastor offered words of compassion to keep everyone on track. Debbie received excellent evaluations from her mentor-pastor and her three-member teaching church committee at the conclusion of each of her two semesters of mentored practice.

Maturing in ministerial formation

This case of Travis at Coastal Maine UCC, located in mid-coastal Maine, demonstrates how personal, professional, and spiritual growth can occur in a pastoral intern. During the mentored practice experience, Travis was challenged to mature in ministerial formation when conflict with a congregant arose.

A bivocational student in his mid-40s, Travis is consistently sought after as a guest preacher for congregations in and near the area he resides. He worked in a management position for a railway company for many years while pursuing his formational studies at the Maine School of Ministry and completed many semesters of required courses before moving into his first semester of mentored practice at this suburban church in Maine. Travis named three learning goals: “1) Grow my understanding and participation in the role of missions within the local church; 2) Gain insights and learn ways of working with people whom I feel are difficult or people with whom I disagree; and 3) Gain a greater understanding and appreciation of the role and importance of social justice within the UCC.” Travis’s mentor-pastor arrangement was unique in that he worked with a team of three mentor-pastors instead of only one. This approach to mentoring was an experiment in the program, and, in Travis’s case, it worked well and produced significant professional growth in his ministry practice.

Travis’s goal of learning more about mission and outreach at Coastal Maine UCC broadened his awareness of the church’s many areas of investment and involvement in the community. This awareness also blossomed in his mentoring process as he participated in a program offered through the Maine Council of Churches to expand his awareness and abilities as a church leader in this outreach area even further.

The semester more than sufficiently allowed me to meet my learning goals. Beginning with missions, I spent time with our Chair of Missions learning about areas of focus for Coastal Maine UCC. I was not aware of the broad areas of involvement and how the church has impacted many lives. Coastal Maine UCC is involved with as many as nine different organizations or programs throughout the year. This really opened my eyes even more to the need of missions and made me realize I should be doing more.

All of this has made a positive difference in Travis's professional formation as a pastoral intern. Perhaps this area of Travis's growth is best described as new skills development. He was grateful for expanding his awareness and developing new skills in the outreach and missions area of ministry.

One core issue that Travis struggled with in his ongoing formation for ministry was how to work in a church with persons he disagrees with or dislikes.

The second goal focused on two people as it relates to difficult people or with whom I disagree. The growing edge in this area was the awareness that these people are beloved children of God despite exhibited behaviors that can be challenging to me. One was a retired clergy member who, discreetly and unknown to me, was asking about my Member in Discernment (MID) status, my covenant with the local UCC Association and with Coastal Maine UCC and questioning my theological thoughts on a text and sermon. I found it to be offensive to learn he was doing this.

Travis was given some insight into how to deal with this situation by his reliable team of mentor-pastors who opened up for him different avenues of approach. He learned essential skills in his mentored practice semester about how to work with congregants who offend him or whose behaviors he felt were out of line.

With encouragement from my advisors, I initiated contact to get to know this member better. I learned how to better navigate someone like this. I learned that he, perhaps, feels the need to be a mentor or wants to be looked upon as a source of great advice and wisdom. I quickly saw a change when I positioned myself as a seeker of his advice and gave him the opportunity to feel he was in an advisor role.

Through this experience, Travis learned new attitudes and approaches to conflict management in parish ministry. Travis had to face conflict directly and honestly. He learned to utilize a team of mentor-pastors to expand perspectives. This process requires a strong commitment to growth for all involved.

This kind of experiential learning can only come in practice. This is especially highlighted when Travis said, "I quickly saw a change when I positioned myself as a seeker of his advice and gave him the opportunity to feel he was in an advisor role." The command of Jesus to "love your enemies" (Matt. 5:38-48) is at play here. This is some-

times not so easy in the real world of lived practice of ministry in a local church setting, Yet Travis made great strides experientially, and he gained some ground by finding and experimenting with new approaches to stubborn problems in the life of the church. In that same way, his work in this spiritually challenging area was mirrored by his team of three mentor-pastors as they and Travis worked to overcome some similar obstacles and some occasional conflict in the mentoring process across the weekly meetings.

Travis's case reveals another dynamic of the mentored practice process: the interplay between the two sides of bivocational work life. On the one hand, in his church work, through the help of his mentors, Travis opened himself to a problem of education for social justice. On the other hand, in his management work for the railroad company, Travis advocated for employees within his company.

The greatest highlight of the semester was around the church's role in social justice. At the suggestion of Rev. Smith, I enrolled in a four-part advocacy series hosted by the Maine Council of Churches. At the same time, my employer was just announcing a new LGBTQ+ Business Resource Group. I was incredibly moved by the first Advocacy Series, which led me to apply to be the chair or vice chair of the new group. I was ultimately named chair of this group and realized my potential and need to be an advocate for LGBTQ+ employees within the company, as well as how my pastoral leadership can help guide the group. I gained a greater appreciation of advocacy needs within the UCC, and I look forward to becoming more involved in causes.

Each endeavor enriched the other. This interplay constituted real professional formation advances for Travis, both in his secular work and in his ministry practice. Travis received excellent evaluations from both his team of three mentor-pastors and his teaching church committee at the conclusion of his first semester of mentored practice with Coastal Maine UCC Church.

Final Reflections

Mentored practice, as it is offered through the curriculum of the Maine School of Ministry, is an essential element in the formation of bivocational ministers as they pursue the goal of ordained min-

istry in the United Church of Christ. Both Debbie and Travis demonstrated invaluable experiential learning and growth gained through mentored practice ministry formation. This approach borrows from the wisdom of the early church—the wisdom of tent-making and apprenticeship. The emerging church in this new day needs to open its heart to new ways of forming ministers that challenge the still dominant residential seminary-based pathway model. A mentored practice model offers many strengths and much potential if widely considered and utilized in a variety of ministry education and formation settings.

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Endnotes

- 1 In this chapter, the terms *student pastor* and *pastoral intern* are used interchangeably. Also, the terms *mentor* and *mentor-pastor* are used in a similar way.
- 2 These persons and the congregations they served have been de-identified to provide confidentiality. Quotations used by written permission of the participants.