

Engage

*A Theological Field Education Toolkit*

Edited by Matthew Floding

Foreword by Lucinda Huffaker

ROWMAN & LITTLEFIELD  
Lanham • Boulder • New York • London

## Contents

Published by Rowman & Littlefield  
A wholly owned subsidiary of  
The Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc.  
4501 Forbes Boulevard, Suite 200, Lanham, Maryland 20706  
<https://rowman.com>

Unit A, Whitacre Mews, 26-34 Stannary Street, London SE11 4AB,  
United Kingdom

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Diagrams in chapter 2 provided by Ashlee Floding

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Information Available

### Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Floding, Matthew, 1955– editor.

Title: Engage : a theological field education toolkit / edited by Matthew Floding ; foreword by Lucinda Huffaker.

Description: Lanham : Rowman & Littlefield, 2017. | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2016041395 (print) | LCCN 2016047558 (ebook) | ISBN 9781442273498 (cloth : alk. paper) | ISBN 9781442273504 (pbk. : alk. paper) | ISBN 9781442273511 (electronic)

Subjects: LCSH: Pastoral theology—Fieldwork. | Clergy—Training of.

Classification: LCC BV4164.5 .E54 2017 (print) | LCC BV4164.5 (ebook) | DDC 253.071/55—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2016041395>

™ The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of American National Standard for Information Sciences Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI/NISO Z39.48-1992.

Printed in the United States of America

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## Chapter Six

# Engaging in Theological Reflection

Matthew Floding

Want to get better at something? Do reflection. That's how a basketball player improves her three-point shot and an actor improves delivering his lines. They take the shot or speak the lines, reflect on technique and how they mentally and physically executed the performance, and go back and practice. This works even better with a mentor.

Ministry requires it all: all that you are and all that you've learned. You become a new kind of person. It takes everything to minister with authenticity, integrity, and faithfulness. By authenticity I mean putting away the façade, any false self in order to minister as God made and gifted you, with a deep sense of self-awareness and humility. Integrity is about theory and practice connecting coherently within you. It means you are becoming, by God's grace, a more integrated person and that your story and your practice of ministry have integrity with the capital "T" tradition, church catholic. At the same time, you're aware that you minister within a small "t" tradition. Yours could be the freshest expression of church at the local microbrewery or a historic church with a plaque on the pulpit that says, "Received from Holland, 1656, Cost Complete with Hour Glass, 25 Beaver Skins."<sup>1</sup> Whatever your tradition, you want to minister faithfully within it. I named "humility" because as my tradition has it, we're "reformed and always reforming."

Theological reflection is a huge component of this. The point of theological reflection is that it actually helps you discover more of who you are; how precious and meaning-full the Tradition is; and the joy of ministering to, with, and receiving from the Christians you journey with. For example, I can't say at the Table, "Grant that being joined together in Jesus, may we . . ." or at a graveside, "In *our* sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life through Jesus Christ . . ." without the feeling of being swept up, with my people, in the great river of God's life in Christ by the Spirit.

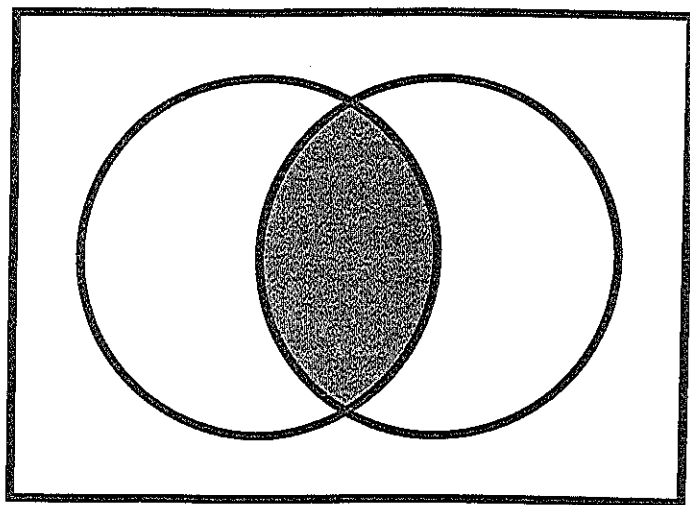
## THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION WITHIN FIELD EDUCATION

Yes, there is a technical definition, and it merits exploration. Within a field education placement, theological reflection is *"reflection upon lived, embodied experience in ministry that seeks to make sense of practice and form reflectors in habits for competent ministry."*<sup>2</sup>

In your field education placement you'll have experiences that both unsettle and enliven you. Rule of thumb: where there's energy, press the pause button and reflect. Your body and your mind are calling you to pay attention. These kinds of experiences in ministry deserve as close a read as any textbook. Most of your shared reflection time will be with your supervisor-mentor and with peers. Working pastors know the richness of reflecting with a colleague or a regular peer reflection group on ministry experiences.<sup>3</sup>

Vulnerability is critical. You don't have to look good in the story. It's like the sign on our church's playground: "Play at your own risk." Take the risk!

Making sense of your experience in order to foster authentic ministry with integrity that is faithful—if not perfect—will involve a process that looks something like a Venn diagram. This gets at the Trinitarian complexity of ministry. Your experience (one circle: naming what happened, how others may have experienced the event, sorting out your feelings and capturing images that come to mind) enters into a deep conversation with the Tradition (second circle: scripture, theology, history, and liturgy) with an attentiveness to God who is at work throughout and bigger than the situation (rectangle). However large the overlap, there will be untidy areas outside the integrative center. That's real ministry.



There are many theological reflection methods. In field education you'll be introduced to some of these. Your supervisor-mentor expects to engage in reflective supervision with you.<sup>4</sup> You can try out different methods of theological reflection appropriate to the event that prompts it.<sup>5</sup> Most approaches expand on basic inductive method: What?, So what?, Now what?<sup>6</sup> That may feel a bit clinical. My counsel is to invite the Spirit's counsel and correction and begin by accurately describing what happened in its context. Your reflection partner(s) will be invaluable for drawing out pertinent information that escaped you. Explore the question, "Why did this happen?" Imagine how others involved may have felt and experienced the event. One word of caution: human beings and congregations are not formulaic, but deep mysteries that make all of our wonderings tentative.

Other kinds of questions get at the intersection of the Venn diagram from the other circle. How does scripture speak to this kind of event? Where might it be situated in the grand narrative of scripture? What biblical images come to mind? What theological themes intersect with this experience? What is at stake theologically? If you reflect with clergy from other traditions, alternative, interesting, and helpful questions will surface.

## WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE?

What does it look like? Great question! I think we can discern formation resulting from reflection at work in characters in the Bible. I'm writing just after Pentecost Sunday, so this example comes to mind. Jesus promised the coming Comforter and told the disciples to wait in Jerusalem. They were gathering daily for their upper room prayers and reflections with the women leaders, including Mary, the mother of Jesus. When the wind of the Spirit blew into Jerusalem and into their lives, someone from the crowd asked, *"What does this mean?"* Peter, who undoubtedly reflected on his amazing reclamation, reconciliation, and restoration by the resurrected Jesus, claimed his commission to feed and tend Christ's sheep.

Peter interprets their shared experience by connecting it to a scriptural text from the prophet Joel. In the last days it will be, God declares, that "I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and daughters shall prophesy" (Joel 2:28). He even connects it skillfully with covenant promises made to David and Israel. Ultimately, Peter's sermon prompts the crowd to ask another theological question, *"What should we do?"* (Acts 2:37). Peter doesn't miss a beat, but calls upon the crowd to respond to the new covenant by repenting and being baptized in the name of Jesus the Christ. He assures them that they will receive the promise of forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit.<sup>7</sup>

Okay, granted, you're not a biblical character, but the same Spirit is at work in you. Formation for ministry is still the result.

Kathryn lives in Friendship House.<sup>8</sup> It's a residential ministerial formation opportunity in which three seminarians and a person with an intellectual disability practice intentional Christian community with other similarly arranged apartments.

Kathryn was completely disarmed by the unconditional love she experienced from her roommate, Jill. When Kathryn moved in she assumed she would be "ministering to" Jill. It turned out to be not the opposite, but as she describes it, "something far better, a mutuality that gave life."

Kathryn began searching for pastoral positions during her senior year. She discerned one in particular that might be a good fit. She applied. She was given an opportunity to interview with the search committee over the phone. They liked what they heard and invited her for an in-person interview. Kathryn asked Jill to accompany her to the interview. She informed the search committee that her apartment-mate would be accompanying her. It surprised the search committee, but they too were disarmed by Jill, and she became part of the interview process! Kathryn later confided that this was part of her discernment process. "Living with Jill and doing our reflection time together as an apartment has so deepened my understanding of the Kingdom of God that I want to serve where removing barriers to full participation in church will not be an issue." Kathryn was extended a call; she said "yes" to God's vision for the church and world and "yes" to that congregation.

Practice theological reflection consistently, and over time it will form you in faith and form you for ministry.

### YOU'RE NOT THE ULTIMATE GOAL

But here's the thing. You're not the ultimate goal of theological reflection. Your participation in the ministry of Jesus for the sake of your congregation (or nonprofit community) and for the world so loved by God is. In other words, your reflective practice will be used by God to fashion a reflective people who themselves are being transformed. Evidence of this is a mark of sustained and patient pastoral engagement and the transforming work of the Spirit.

I was speaking with a pastor friend who shared a story of this kind of reflective transformation. This pastor had patiently led the congregation to discern that frequent Communion was encouraged by Jesus, grounded in the early church's practice seen in scripture and faithful to their own theological tradition.

Weekly Communion became the practice of the congregation. Any change takes time to get used to, but for the most part this new practice was

well received by the congregation. Not by everyone, of course. The pastor heard about this, too.

The steady rhythm of Eucharistic hospitality, patient liturgical catechesis by the pastor, and the unexpected gifts that came with frequent Communion stirred up something. One day the pastor received a letter from a person who had been less than enthusiastic about the change.

It seems that the change of practice had unsettled the person's church routine. To his credit, and no doubt the Spirit's, the man engaged more deeply with his weekly experience, scripture, and his own theological convictions. He reflected on his personal transformation:<sup>9</sup>

First, almost every Sunday, sitting where I do, as people go to the Table, I can look forward, or across, and see men and women I know; people who are suffering, carrying burdens, visible or invisible; and I can silently pray for them, as I know some of them do for me.

*Jesus took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is my body."*

Other mornings, I am desperate, hoping there will be some magic in the cup, willing to crawl on my knees to the Table . . . to say, "I believe; Lord help Thou mine unbelief. . . ."

Or to be reminded, we are one in the Lord, those folks I revere and those I secretly shake my head at "from a great height"; all belong to Christ, not to me. His blood covers them just as effectively as it does me. . . . Each week the world erases that from the blackboard of my heart; at the Table Christ patiently writes it back.

*Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them saying, "Drink from it, all of you; for this is the blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins."*

And I am old. I now read the obituaries every day, and too often, there is a colleague; my latest sun is sinking fast, my race is nearly run; I cringe at what lies ahead, I fear the darkness. But, each and every Sunday, I hear, stretching all the way back to my childhood, the voice of the pastor, the words of the Word: For as often as you eat this bread, and drink this cup, you do proclaim the Lord's death, until He cometh. It matters.

*For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.*

The author closed with an apology: "Sorry. Not well put into words."

Your commitment to theological reflection matters; not just for your sake, but for theirs.

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Can you recall and describe an experience in which your reflection brought about personal change?
2. What biblical stories and theological themes are woven into the core of your identity?

## SUGGESTED READING

- Blodgett, Barbara, and Matthew Floding, eds. *Brimming with God: Reflecting Theologically on Cases in Ministry*. Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2015.
- Click, Emily. "Ministerial Reflection." In *Welcome to Theological Field Education!*, edited by Matthew Floding, 31–43. Herndon, VA: Alban, 2011.
- Killen, Patricia O'Connell, and John de Beer. *The Art of Theological Reflection*. New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1999.
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## Chapter Seven

Engaging in Sustaining  
Spiritual Practices

Deborah K. Davis

After seventeen years as a hospital chaplain I experienced a powerful sense of compassion fatigue. My ministry was caring for those who were suffering; responding to crises; and being present for patients, doctors, nurses, and the staff. I was well placed as the person who brought calm into stressful situations; acceptance in the face of judgment; honest hope when confronted with wishful thinking; and a safe place for people to confess their problems, failures, hopes, and dreams. I was the mother of three energetic sons, a wife, the moderator of the presbytery, and an on-call chaplain twenty-four hours/seven days a week. I was doing everything I loved, and I was totally, absolutely, burnt out. I was empty. There was no living water left in my well.

To address my compassion fatigue I enrolled in a weeklong seminar in spiritual direction. I imagined I would spend this week multitasking: getting some time away from the pressures of my life, receiving training that would enhance my work as a chaplain, and beginning a book I was contemplating on chaplaincy. So much more happened!

As I slowed down to pray, meditate upon scripture, sit in silence, and receive spiritual nourishment, the Holy Spirit began to revive me. I drank deeply from the well of a variety of spiritual practices that invited me to a closer relationship with God. During my quiet times my thoughts, which usually focused on problem solving and list making, were replaced by a new ability to listen for the voice of God guiding me. I was given my life back by being introduced to the concept of developing spiritual practices in my life that would reconnect me to God, the true source of living water.