Sacred Sagacity: Formation and Training for Ministry in a Church of England Seminary

Martyn Percy*

Introduction

I suppose that the first and most obvious thing to say about the purpose of ordination training—formation and education for ministry—is that it isn't immediately obvious. What, after all, is one being prepared for? As Urban Holmes III presciently observed more than thirty years ago, the roles and tasks of the clergy are not nearly as palpable in the late twentieth-century North Atlantic as they might have been one hundred years earlier.[1] It almost goes without saying that if the professional status of clergy is somewhat ambivalent, then the training and formation that seminarians (or ordinands) receive is also likely to reflect this.[2] Yet this is not quite so. Students preparing for ordained ministry—in whatever institution they are being trained, formed, and educated—can point to a curriculum, usually with a multiplicity of options but also a "core," and to some kind of disciplined approach to prayer and worship. They can point to an ecclesial tradition that at least adds some kind of accent to the ethos of the institution, and to some practical assignments that continue to test the depth and trajectory of a vocation. And they can point to a continuous

* Martyn Percy is Principal of Ripon College Cuddesdon and the Oxford Ministry Course. He is also Professor of Theological Education at King's College, London, and Canon Theologian of Sheffield Cathedral.

1 Urban T. Holmes III, *The Future Shape of Ministry: A Theological Projection* (New York: Seabury Press, 1971); Martyn Percy, *Clergy: The Origin of Species* (London: T & T Clark, 2006).

2 Robert Towler and Anthony Coxon, *The Fate of the Anglican Clergy: A Sociological Study* (London: Macmillan, 1979); Charles Foster, Lisa Dahill, Lawrence Golemon, and Barbara Wang Tolentino, *Educating Clergy: Teaching Practices and Pastoral Imagination* (San Francisco, Calif.: Jossey-Bass, 2006); Anthony Russell, *The Clerical Profession* (London: SPCK, 1980); Edward Schillebeeckx, *Ministry: Leadership in the Community of Jesus Christ* (New York: Crossroads, 1985).

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process of theological reflection that links the personal, social, intellectual, and transcendent dynamics of formation.

Yet such a sketchy and skeletal outline of the priorities for theological education affords considerable license to any ecclesial tradition and its training institutions. What then, if anything, can be said about Anglican theological education? Is there anything that might be said to unite the diversity of institutions one encounters within the global Communion? Beyond the superficial obviousness of differences—in terms of resources, history, and ecclesial emphasis—is there some kind of trace or sense of a common "genetic code" that might be said to be distinctive, especially in relation to the rather nebulous concept of "formation"? Several observations can be made. But before that, it is necessary to make a few more general remarks relating to theological education and the bearing it has on the kind of preparation for ministry that institutions are inherently responsible for.

For example, over the past three decades, the Church of England has witnessed a number of quite significant sea-changes in the profile and delivery of formation and training for ordained ministry. In the mid-1970s, almost three-quarters of ordinands were under the age of thirty. Today, that figure has dropped to a little over 10 percent of the total numbers in training—almost the same as those in training over the age of sixty. The average age of ordination is now around forty. Correspondingly, there has been a significant shift in the expectations provided through training. Ordinands enter colleges and courses with significantly more life experience and maturity. They are also likely to be of similar age to the teaching staff, which has inevitably led to the development of more consensual and negotiated patterns of training, in place of programs that might have once been simply imposed.[3]

To complement this development, the Church of England has also witnessed a significant change in the range of contexts for formation and training. Thirty years ago, more than two-thirds of ordinands trained in residential colleges, with part-time training in non-residential courses a relative novelty. The tables are almost entirely turned at the beginning of the twenty-first century, with the majority of ordinands now being formed in a variety of non-residential courses. Six of the eleven residential colleges are broadly evangelical

[3] At Cuddesdon, the average age of ordinands in residential training is thirty-eight, and those in non-residential training forty-nine. The male to female ratio is 50:50.

(reflecting the popularity of that wing of the church). Yet there are over two dozen regional training schemes and ordained local ministry courses. The latter are ecclesiologically and theologically broad, continuing to reflect the historic strength of and the English spiritual proclivity for openness: articulate, conversational, and inclusive breadth that serves the whole needs of the parish, rather than a particular confessional stance.

At the core of training and formation—and this will be true for almost all English Anglican training institutions—is a commitment to interweaving theology with experience, and usually in some kind of dynamic reflective practice. Often this is done through the exercise of ministry: observing, participating, leading, and then reflecting. In such a context, the experiences of ordinands can often be quite turbulent before they become fulfilling. They may undergo a process of "dis-memberment" before "re-membering," as they encounter a range of experiences and practices that can comfort and disturb in equal measure. The teaching underpinning this activity will most likely be constructive and edifying. While the very act of education (from *educare*—literally to draw out) can be costly, it is an essential prerequisite to the process of transformation that ministerial formation is concerned with. James Hopewell observes:

> Rather than assume that the primary task of ministry is to alter the congregation, church leaders should make a prior commitment to understand the given nature of the object they propose to improve. Many strategies for operating upon local churches are uninformed about the cultural constitution of the parish; many schemes are themselves exponents of the culture they seek to overcome.[4]

So the very nature of contemporary parochial ministry in England can place a demanding onus on institutions preparing individuals for the ministry of the church.[5] This might include, for example, instilling

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[4] James Hopewell, *Congregation: Stories and Structures* (Philadelphia, Pa.: Fortress Press, 1987), 11.

[5] Malcolm Torry, ed., *The Parish: A Theological and Practical Exploration* (London: SCM-Canterbury Press, 2004); Ian Markham and Martyn Percy, eds., *Why Liberal Churches are Growing* (London: Continuum, 2005); Martyn Percy, *Engaging with Contemporary Culture: Christianity, Theology and the Concrete Church* (Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2005).

some sort of recognition that the (somewhat dubious) distinction between mission and maintenance is often a false dichotomy in the majority of parochial contexts, where the historic religious resonance of the church building will have a widespread (if sometimes unclear) spiritual significance. Thus, good maintenance of a building ("sermons in stone") is likely to be, *de facto*, good mission in any parochial context. The building may involve and affirm the neighborhood in a myriad of ways beyond the merely functional operation of providing a place for meeting, thereby nourishing social and spiritual capital. The relationship between a church and its people in many parishes is essentially perichoretic—a mutual indwelling of various cultural and religious currents that blend and interpenetrate, producing new spiritual meanings while also maintaining distinctive sodalities.[6]

These remarks are perhaps especially suggestive for parochial ministry, but they pertain as well to formation and theological education more generally, whether in residential or non-residential contexts. Quality may need to be valued more than quantity; pace, solidarity, and connectedness more than haste, energy, and apparent achievement. It may be important to encourage ordinands to see that the worth of affirming the resonance of the past may have a higher spiritual value than the apparent obviousness of the need for relevance and progress. Presence and deep relational engagement may have a greater missiological impact than overt evangelistic schema and initiatives. And clearly, the ministerial blend of being and doing—the clergyperson as both contemplative and activist—may need to be adjusted in any transition from urban or suburban contexts to rural ministry. Context may have a direct bearing on theological output. In other words, theology can be a rather slow discipline; it takes time to accrue wisdom for the journey. Part of the process of formation is to comprehend the vision for theological reflection, which is attending patiently and deliberately to all kinds of material. This means helping ordinands to "loiter with intention" in issues and encounters, to dawdle consciously and purposefully in their deliberations, so that clarity and wisdom come to fruition. Theology is not a discipline for hurrying.

[6] Although my comments mostly relate to preparation for parish ministry, the church increasingly recognizes that many engaged in training spend the majority of their ministry in a variety of sector ministries, or possibly new and innovative missiological initiatives that are non-parochial.

Some Characteristics of Formation

That said, what might be some of the common denominators in formation within Anglican theological education? Here I want to confine my observations to residential and non-residential education and training within the context of an Anglican seminary in England, and make some remarks about the shape of formation as it particularly relates to such institutions, rather than to elucidate the principles of theological reflection more generally.[7] That said, I suspect that these observations will resonate with other parts of the Anglican Communion, and with theologies of ministry in most mainline Protestant denominations. Here, then, are several suggestions, a list that must be far from exhaustive and is perhaps quite personal. I have listed several characteristics that I would venture are relatively common to flourishing institutions, although they are clearly rooted in my own experiences and expectations.

First, the individual and the institution are set apart from their surroundings for deep and rich composition. There must be some understanding that the person in training, as a character formed within the Christian story and the demands of the gospel, has responded to a vocational call and has in some sense now been set apart. Ordination is the process and event whereby this calling is recognized and then established in office. Correspondingly, one of the primary tasks of education and formation for ministry is to integrate the individual character with the catholicity of the office. One of my predecessors at Cuddesdon articulated some of the dynamics within this process, in his inimitable manner:

> [A priest] will not depend on status, nor upon his own abilities, nor upon a system, but upon God. [The primary quality] required is a man's sincerity in prayer and faith and compassion. These may yet be hardly developed, but the relevant signs will consist in obstacles overcome, work voluntarily undertaken and thoroughly performed, and a general attitude of responsibility as a Christian man rather than an interest in the social and ornamental aspects of the priesthood. Then they [the selectors] will look for something which can be described as a love of God's world and his people.

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[7] Miroslav Volf and Dorothy C. Bass, eds., *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2002).

> Affectation and pretence are danger signs, and the sociability required of a priest consists in a spontaneity of interest in a world and a society of which he feels himself instinctively and naturally a part.[8]

Correspondingly, some understanding of the place or institution set apart for formation and training is also necessary, preferably with some evidence of the capacity to read the dense encryption of the distinctive ethos of the institution it is in, which is usually born out of an alloy of alliances. For example, Cuddesdon College was founded by Bishop Wilberforce in 1854 as a mainstream Anglican college, "free from party and sectarian disputes."[9] Ripon Hall was first established at Ripon in 1898 by the diocesan bishop, William Boyd Carpenter, as a hostel for theological students. His vision for theological training was that "ordinands had to take on board the new needs of society" and embrace the lessons that were to be found in life and learning outside the control of the church.[10] The two institutions were merged in 1975, and their distinctive and combined ethos remains detectable. A third institution was added in 2006, with the incorporation of the Oxford Ministry Course, a non-party and non-residential training institution,

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[8] Robert Runcie, *Church Observer*, (Spring 1964): 11.

[9] That said, one should note the opposition to the founding of Anglican theological colleges in nineteenth-century England. Unlike the colonies, none existed in England before the early nineteenth century. There was initial suspicion and hostility directed toward the burgeoning number of new institutions that were founded, with fears expressed that education and formation for ministry taking place outside the control of the major universities could lead to elitism and sectarianism on the part of the church. As late as 1921, Arthur Headlam, then Regius Professor of Divinity of Oxford and a somewhat ambiguous conservative churchman, wrote that "there is a great danger of theological teaching being given in theological colleges . . . the students are trained exclusively according to one particular point of view. Their minds, instead of being accustomed to examining and weighing the merits of different opinions, become stereotyped. . . . The tendency of a theological college will be to give a man a set of opinions and to teach him to pass by and ignore those who differ from him. The tendency of a University is to make a man compare different points of view, to form his opinions after weighing alternatives, and therefore to hold the system which commends itself to him with due respect for the opinions of those who differ from him." Arthur Headlam, *Theological Education at the Universities* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1921), 22.

[10] Mark Chapman, ed., *Ambassadors of Christ: Commemorating 150 Years of Theological Education at Cuddesdon 1854–2004* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2004), 89–90.

which could legitimately claim to be faithful to the vision of both Wilberforce and Carpenter—broad and non-party in its ecclesiology, and open-minded in its theological outlook.[11] This breadth, of course, is not without complications. Granted, theological programs are aligned with the same spiritual ethos (open, enquiring, and so on), but disagreement can be the price we pay for diversity and depth—as in any rich and cosmopolitan institution. Yet this is arguably preferable to the comforts of narrow confessional conformity, which can breed its own tensions. So for ordinands, some understanding of the composition of the institution they are in will have a direct bearing on their own formation.

Second, formation is a progressive and subtle journey. Whatever a theological college is, it is not an ecclesiastical boot camp. There is no thirty-nine-buttoned-cassock drill sergeant to rouse the students to prayer. Most institutions, whether residential or non-residential, will speak quite naturally of the discipline of prayer as foundational, but it will invariably be something that is instilled rather than imposed. Similarly, despite all the assignments and other tasks to complete, institutions will require their students to pay attention to the condition of the heart as much as the head. In that sense, the process of formation requires students to adopt a sense of perspective and pace, to "make haste slowly" (*festina lente).* Discipleship is a marathon, not a sprint. Correspondingly, there has to be some trust in the continuing process of discernment, and less concern about the outcome: Christ is Lord of the journey.

It therefore follows that ordinands should be encouraged to immerse themselves in the flow of what is happening, how they are becoming, and what they will be. Institutions invest much time and energy in trying to develop and cultivate a certain sagacity, shrewdness, and wisdom for the journey ahead, to say nothing of emotional and ecclesial intelligence. But in pedagogical terms, this is more of an art than a science, a world for the reflective practitioner rather than the pure theorist. John Paul Lederach invites us to engage and trust in a process that is sometimes led by the heart as much as the head. His advice provides a good fit for any recipe in the field of theological education, reflection, and formation:

[11] Cuddesdon currently has more than 120 students training for ordained ministry in the Church of England. Sixty-five percent are residential, and 55 percent are non-residential.

> [T]he more I wanted to intentionally produce a result, the more elusive it seemed to be; the more I let go and discovered the unexpected openings along the way, at the side of the journey, the more progress was made. . . . [The] greatest contributions to peace building did not seem to be those that emerged from accumulated skill or intentional purpose. They were those that happened unexpectedly. At a certain time, I came to call this divine naivety . . . the practitioners' dilemma of learning more from mistakes than successes. But the reality was that they were not mistakes in the proper sense of the word; they were important things I learnt along the way that were not planned. I needed a combination of [the] divine and naïve. [The] divine pointed to the transcendent and unexpected—but that led towards insight and better understanding. To see that which is not readily planned or apparent, however, requires a peripheral type of vision, the willingness to move sideways—and even backward—in order to move forward . . . an innocence of expectation that watches carefully for the potential of building change in good and in difficult times . . . foster[ing] the art of the possible. . . . [T]he key is to [learn how] to build from the unexpected . . . to connect [the apparently] accidental with sagacity.[12]

Third, the type of knowledge acquired in formation is also at issue. Those charged with the ministry of oversight—in both sacred and secular spheres—often speak of intuition rather than extended calculation or analysis when dealing with "unique situations to which they must respond under conditions of stress and limited time."[13] This knack or wisdom depends on tacit knowing, where overseers seldom turn to theories or methods in managing situations, but instead realize that their own effectiveness depends on having learned (and continuing to learn) through the "long and varied practice in the analysis of . . . problems, which builds up a generic, essentially unanalyzable capacity for problem-solving."[14] In other words, ordinands learn by experience in the field. Moreover, it is probably the case that Anglicanism is often easier to identify through persons rather than

[12] John Paul Lederach, *The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 115.

[13] Donald A. Schön, *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action* (London: Ashgate, 1991), 239.

[14] Schön, *The Reflective Practitioner*, 241.

systems, through examples of faith and polity rather than theories of it. Here, the management of a congregation within the context of the challenges of contemporary culture is much more like a knack than a skill; organizing or shaping the church is about learned habits of wisdom more than it is about rules and theories.

Acknowledging the place of tacit and intuitive knowledge has important implications for teaching those engaged in the task of Christian leadership. It is in sharing—sometimes quite deeply, I think, and at quite a personal level—how issues are addressed and resolved, and how individuals and organizations fare in this, and what reflections or analysis one may have about them, that tacit knowledge is built up—within relationships based on trust, such that the organization may then experience both stability and a degree of transcendence. There is a valuable repository of spiritual treasure in dense, and occasionally tense, collegiality, and in the storied communion of shared wisdom. This is why the *character* of the theological college or non-residential course, as a community of fellow learners on the viaticum, is so important in formation and training. Thus, how we teach ordinands to "hold" complex issues; the character that teachers and mentors exhibit under pressure; and how individuals continue to embody being the very best kinds of reflective practitioners—these are the skills that often make their deep mark in the formation process.

Fourth, openness and vulnerability have a role in learning. Thinking and practicing need to be continually returned to the heart of the vocation, which is, of course, a mystery of risk. Unpacking it takes time and energy, but it also invites seminarians and ordinands to journey deeper into wisdom and wholeness. There is, therefore, a vested interest in encouraging students to engage with and encounter some of the things they might actually fear (issues, ideas, scenarios, and so on). This goes hand in hand with sounding the depths of the complexities of all kinds of encounters, and developing the habit of deep listening, of imagining beyond what is seen and what presents on the surface. Risking vulnerability is part of the price we pay for love; and this kind of openness belongs to the economy of vocations. In this sense, every truly self-conscious theological college will know, somewhere, that all the members of its community are beginners.

To complement this, there must be the possibility of failure. However, it is also recognized that institutions are often best judged not by how many stellar scholars they produce, but by how they care for and mentor the weak and the vulnerable. Mistakes happen, and I

think the best thing those charged with teaching and mentoring can try to do is encourage seminarians to learn from these things when they do happen. Failure is not the worst thing; letting it utterly defeat you is. It takes a special kind of wisdom and courage to face failure and defeat, and then to try to move on from it. But this kind of maturity should perhaps especially be cultivated, in order to help cope with the reality of life's miscibility.[15]

Fifth, the relationships between embodiment, power, and wisdom need continual exploration. There is arguably something to be said for a formation process that probes and loosens any relationships with power and privilege. It is perhaps good to be reminded that the gospel is about eternal rewards, not the temporal baubles of the church. Our eyes are to be fixed on Jesus, not on achievement. God is interested in "much more than a set of competencies. No accumulation of skills impresses God. God is interested in the heart of the priest, more than how impressive his or her curriculum vitae appears to be."[16]

Yet there is no substitute for the cultivation of holy wisdom. All of us, I think, encounter projects and persons in ministry that either fail to turn out to be all that we hoped, or can even become arenas of defeat. It is reminiscent of what Graham Greene has to say in *The Power and the Glory*, that hatred is the failure of the imagination. Holy wisdom, then, is something related to but other than conventional wisdom. It is an embodied form of spiritual intelligence that is more than mere shrewdness. It is interpretative, lived, and transformative; and those who encounter it will more often speak of an epiphany than mere insight.

An Analogical Coda

In summary, there may be something to be said for theological institutions—of whatever tradition, and whether residential or nonresidential—placing a stress on the great Benedictine virtues of hospitality, service, and listening. Each of these is vital to the flourishing of the community of learning and the individual in formation. Being open to God, paying attention to others, and deep listening—these are

[15] Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Heart* (New York: Continuum, 2006).
[16] John Pritchard, *The Life and Work of a Priest* (London: SPCK, 2007), 4.

the profound spiritual exercises that allow individuals and communities (whether gathered or dispersed) to attend to the cadence, timbre, and rhythm of what they are about. So how can we understand the dynamics that take place during ministerial training and formation? Mere description, I think, does not do justice to the depth and richness of the process that takes place. The language we need to capture the journey often comes to fruition by being framed in paradox of the heart and the soul.[17] And this is where the analogical imagination can be helpful. Thus, one aspect of what takes place in formation is that seminarians learn to find themselves in what one writer describes as "God's orchestra." John Pritchard puts it like this:

> Christian leaders are like conductors of God's local orchestra. Our task is multi-layered. We have to interpret the music of the gospel to bring out all its richness and textures and glorious melodies. We have ourselves to be students of the music, always learning, and sharing, with the orchestra what both we and they have learned about this beautiful music. We have to help members of the orchestra to hear each other, and to be aware of each other as they play their "instrument" or use their gift. Without that sensitivity to each other both an orchestra and a church descend into a cacophony of conflicting noises.[18]

To continue with this analogy, and to apply it more directly to theological institutions, three key observations seem to be particularly pertinent. First, whatever part one plays in the orchestra, institutions have to try to pay attention to the bass line, and not to get overly distracted by the melody. The bass line is all about patience, depth, and pace. It may also contain the givens of theological discourse. It is about developing sustainable rhythms for the entire symphony, not just the short movements in which one part of the orchestra might mainly feature.

Second, teachers and mentors have the task of coaching and conducting. There may be some new scores to teach as well; and the

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[17] Robert Dykstra, ed., *Images of Pastoral Care: Classic Readings* (St. Louis, Mo.: Chalice Press, 2005). Paradoxical images include "wise fool," "servant-leader," "wounded healer," and "intimate stranger." These images help frame the pastoral nature of ordained ministry, alongside the classic biblical models (shepherd) and those drawn from contemporary life (for example, coach or manager).

[18] Pritchard, *The Life and Work of a Priest*, 109–110.

performance of these helps to form the necessary skills in theological and pastoral discernment. In turn, this enables ordinands to develop intuition in relation to knowledge, to become reflexive yet also surefooted. Thus, institutions carry the responsibility for developing the natural and given talents, rather than simply replacing them with new instructions. Education is both input and drawing out, to enable spiritual, pastoral, and intellectual flourishing.

Third, just as Scripture is symphonic in character—many different sounds making a single, complex, but beautiful melody—so it is with God's church, and the institutions that equip ministers for the communities in which they serve. The task of the teacher and mentor is, then, not just to help students understand and critique the scores they read and perform, but also to try to help each seminarian play beautifully and function faithfully—and all within the context of the diversity of the many different sounds and notes that God gives an institution to make.