

# Ministry Practice Handbook for SFE Students



Adelaide **College of Divinity**



**Uniting College**  
for Leadership & Theology

---

## **Contents**

Supervised Field Education	1
The Art of Theological Reflection	10
The Writing of Presented Material	19
Contract Between Supervisor & SFE Student	22
Assessment of a SFE Unit	24
A Select Bibliography	41

## Supervised Field Education

Transformational learning means that individuals change their frames of reference; that is, they change the complex webs of assumptions, expectations, psychological characteristics, values, and beliefs that act as filters through which they view both themselves and the world... transformational learning involves a deep shift of vision.

Geraldine Holton

### Introduction

Welcome to a world of exploration and discovery!

Ministry Practice or more formally, Supervised Field Education (SFE), plays a pivotal role at Uniting College. It is a key integrative element of the Adelaide College of Divinity (ACD) Bachelor of Ministry (BMin) degree and foundational to the formation of ministry practitioners in both skill and personal development. Like any good practical and reflective learning process, SFE can be transformational in its ability to affirm, challenge, broaden and surprise.

Above all else, SFE is a cooperative and mutually enriching set of relationships that exist between the student, their ministry – community – context, supervisor, peers and the Spirit who guides, teaches and equips. In this light, the College's Vision is pertinent to a student or candidate embarking on their SFE journey:

Led by the Spirit, we see Uniting College growing and empowering hope-filled, discerning and imaginative disciples immersed in God's story, to birth and invigorate a range of thriving ministries across this ancient and fast changing land.

'Hope-filled, discerning and imaginative' discipleship is not only desirable within students formal learning experience. These are patterns of practice and being that the College seeks to help consolidate for life within each practitioner, something SFE promotes through its learning contract and theological reflection processes.

SFE is a 'safe place' for learning to minister, in and through the expansive and reconciling love of God. By means of experiment, recognition of gaps in skill and experience, glorious failure, unexpected successes, searching honesty and intentional use of a budding pastoral imagination<sup>1</sup>, a student can expect to be further conformed to the compassionate mind and heart of Christ.

That being said, SFE offers a practical, yet intentionally educational framework that enables a ministry student from whatever cultural or social background to best learn from their field experience.

As an integral part of the BMin, SFE students, as with every other BMin subject, are forwarded an ACD Student Assessment Method (SAM) at the beginning of the semester in which the SFE unit is to take place. Though the unit is presently non-graded, the expectation of the College is that each student will approach the five assessment components with due diligence. For example, monthly attendance and participation within in the Peer Supervision Group is not simply mandatory, a written covenant of loyalty to the group and its processes is signed by the whole group to ensure the best learning environment possible.

---

1 See, *For Life Abundant: Practical Theology, Theological Education and Christian Ministry*, Chapter 2.

The basic cycle of SFE interacts between:

- *Intentional/imaginative planning*
- *Skilful and artful practice*
- *Critical yet soulful evaluation of the various ministry tasks*
- *Renewed planning with repeated practice in mind*

This cyclical rhythm is sustained by a number of supportive relationships through which planning, practice, reflection and evaluation are rehearsed continuously. They are:

- The **Supervisory Meeting**, facilitated by a trained and accredited supervisor.
- The monthly **Ministry Reflection Team**, facilitated by a trained convener and membership recruited from the ministry context or setting.
- The monthly **Peer Supervision Group**, facilitated by the Uniting College's Lecturer in Ministry Practice.
- The ministry student's regular **Personal Reflective and Supervisory Practices** form the learning and development framework. Within growing confidences of vocational identity and in God's equipping, transformation of being and practice can readily take place.

### Prerequisites for SFE

At the commencement of their Placement, a SFE student is expected to have a reasonable level of physical adeptness and discernible levels of emotional/spiritual health. Where there is a pre-existing medical [or other relevant] condition that may limit the student's ability to fulfil the requirements of a SFE placement, the student will first need to discuss such issues with the Lecturer in Ministry Practice (LMP) and the ministry setting leadership to which the student is accountable. Suitable modifications to the planning and implementation of the placement can therefore be made.

As a Presbytery/Synod requirement, a SFE student also needs to have in place (and in writing) a current **Police Check**, recent training in a **UCA Code of Ethics** program and current **Safe Place for Children** training certification. In every circumstance, a **Host Agreement Form** is to be signed by the governing body, eg the Church Council of the ministry setting, well in advance of the placement beginning. This will be sent separately to students or the Host executive, or given as an insert to this Handbook. A working knowledge of the student's **Learning Covenant** and its applications within the ministry context is mandatory.

The **Covenant between Supervisor and SFE Student** needs to be submitted to the Lecturer in Ministry Practice within the first two weeks of the placement. You will find a template on page 22–23 of this Handbook.

In terms of BMin requirements (see a current ACD Handbook), entry in to SFE 1 requires two introductory subjects to have been successfully completed, namely 'Introduction to Christian Leadership' and 'Introduction to Formation for Ministry.' Please also note that SFE is linked to Integrative Ministry Practice A & B. Both these are core subjects for Uniting Church ministry candidates and ideally are taken whilst enrolled in SFE 1 & 2.

Obviously, SFE is an undergraduate unit and therefore needs to be approached with due attention given to detail and assessment requirements.

## **Supervisory Support and Accountability Structures**

Ministers commit to a vigilant watchfulness of (their own) discipleship with an eye to its full character, vast limitations, and pressing claims. Ministry exists as a service to discipleship for the sake of the Church's mission.

Kathleen A. Cahalan

As previously listed, supervision in a SFE placement occurs in four contexts:

- with an accredited supervisor, in a face to face setting
- through participation in a Ministry Reflection Team
- covenanted membership of the College Peer Supervision Group
- by means of on-going personal reflection, eg journaling around experience and feelings, critical incident reports, video diary, etc.

## **One to One Supervision**

Supervision that encourages and sustains dialogue for exploration and discovery also recognises that the supervising pastor is also and always in formation. Formation is ongoing for all of us who discern our place in the mystery of the infinite God who would choose to incarnate holy love and compassion through our humanness.

Charlene Jin Lee

Each SFE student will be supervised by an appropriate and gifted person. Supervisors receive ongoing training and are accredited by Uniting College. They are also recognised for their ministry experience, effectiveness and present sense of call to this important mentoring role. A list of supervisors can be obtained from the Lecturer in Ministry Practice. The supervisory relationship is the core component of the SFE experience. Meetings can take place weekly (1 hour) or fortnightly (two hours), with the student preparing material for discussion in advance.

While the Supervisor's leadership role is overseeing in nature, this should not hinder a growing sense of mutual trust and learning. Good supervision is highly relational, grounded in the guidance and friendship of the Spirit.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> See, 'The Art of Supervision and Formation,' in *Welcome to Theological Field Education!* Chapter 2.

## **The Ministry Reflection Team**

The MRT functions as a formal committee seeking to creatively contribute to the formation of the ministry student/candidate. Parallel to this task, and undergirding its very purpose, the MRT is a community of friends. In the safety of supportive and truthful relationships, ministry students can progressively allow themselves to become vulnerable and open to group insight for the sake of new learning. In this vital way, the MRT is a tangible expression of God's encouraging and equipping grace.

Uniting College MRT Handbook

Led by a nominated convener, a Ministry Reflection Team (MRT) can consist of up to six members. It is comprised of people active within the student ministry context. The MRT is chosen in close collaboration with key leaders and the student's supervisor if they are on site. When this is not possible due to increasingly diverse forms of placements, the Lecturer in Ministry Practice needs to be consulted very early on in the placement process.

The specific role and tasks of the Ministry Reflection Team are set out in a separate handbook that is readily available and essential to convenor and student. Basic to its purpose, though, is to provide ongoing and constructive feedback to the student from the perspective of those being ministered to. The convener's end of placement report is a very important assessment tool.

## **Peer Group Supervision**

God knows you better than you know yourself. Through the power of reflecting with peers, you can see and hear the gifts God has given you. You have blind sides where your talents remain hidden from you, and sometimes you discount your natural gifts and skills. When that happens, peer reflection can be the voice of God calling you fully into your true vocational identity. These communities rest on holy ground. The interactions are sacred...

Donna R. Duensing

Four monthly peer group gatherings at the College provide a vital learning opportunity during each semester of SFE. Students covenant at the outset of the semester to make the time (approximately 2 hours) a priority so as to listen carefully to one another, prayerfully support each other and hold confidences, individually offer case studies and theologically reflect as a group. This learning experience will hopefully set life-time patterns of peer interaction and relational respect across personality or theological divides.

The peer group is facilitated and led by the Lecturer in Ministry Practice.

## **Personal Reflection (Growing in Self Awareness)**

Discipleship is not concerned with reproducing point for point the external aspects of the master's life and work. It is concerned rather, with making the master's wisdom, dispositions, and spirit shape our own character so that we will prefer spontaneously the way of life that harmonizes with the master's.

Richard Gula

The SFE student is encouraged to record their placement experiences either by journal writing, case study, verbatim writing, or by keeping a video diary. Consciously growing in self awareness within the practice(s) of ministry is a great gift to all concerned, perhaps the greatest to be offered by a minister. It encourages a habitual taking of responsibility for one's ministry practices and for all aspects of Christian discipleship.

Therefore, regularly recording creative ideas or practical strategies and noticing emotional, cognitive and spirited movements related to the practice of ministry, each contribute to greater senses of congruence (feeling at home in the vocation), discernment and effectiveness. In this way, both thoughts and feelings can be held up for scrutiny and further self-understanding. The 'gleaning' can then become the basis for reflecting and sharing with others.

## **Preparing for a Supervisory Meeting**

A key element of SFE is the developing supervisory relationship. Therefore, each meeting needs to be prepared for thoughtfully. The following guideline is a good and proven one:

- Twenty four hours in advance of the meeting, the student forwards to the supervisor, either a case study, a critical incident report, a theological reflection, a sermon, a verbatim or any other written reflection applicable and 'alive' to their recent practice of ministry.
- The supervisor has ample time, then, to read through the report adding any comments and questions within the body of the text, returning the document in time for the meeting. The student is then able to reflect upon the issues raised and arrive well prepared for the supervisory session.

The supervisory relationship is designed to further sharpen the student's self awareness in ministry practice, thus enhancing the quality and scope of it. It should also help facilitate discussion around vocational gifting and where best the student's gifts can be offered in the life of the church and community. Such intentional mentoring and reflective companionship is invaluable to the learning and expression of ministry skills. It is oversight with a simple goal in mind; spirited participation in the mission of God to the world.

## **Reflective & Reflexive Ministry Practice**

Christian practices contain claims about both what God is doing in the world and what our responses to God entails. Practices resist the separation of thinking from acting, of Christian teaching from the life of faith.

Kathleen A. Cahalan

To be reflexive is to find a way of standing outside the self to examine, for example, how seemingly unwittingly we are involved in creating social or professional structures counter to our espoused values. It enables becoming aware of the limits of our knowledge, of how our behaviour is complicit in forming organisational practices which, for example, marginalise groups or exclude individuals.

Gillie Bolton

SFE students often refer to being “reflected out,” sometimes out of frustration for practically wanting to get on with offering ministry. After all, there are many time-consuming supervisory meetings, MRT gatherings, Peer Group meetings, endless reports to write and personally stretching journal entries to make!

Reflective and reflexive ministry practice holds it to be true that experience teaches very little if it is not intentionally reflected upon for the sake of future practice. By way of great contrast, non-reflective ministry practices may have a prolific, even impressive feel to them, but if not grounded in a deepening of spirit, mind and soul, they can quickly fizzle and burn out, or do major harm to others. If ministry practice is anything, it is embodiment of God’s good, evolving grace, not simply a list of ministry tasks to perform. That is why we speak much about ministry formation at Uniting College. It is the formation of a minister’s character virtues in the ways and being of Christ that ultimately holds the key to the offering of imaginative and skilful ministry practices within the church and wider communities.

## **Written Reports & Accountabilities**

At the conclusion of the SFE placement, the Supervisor, MRT and student will review, *in clear light of the stated learning goal and objectives*, what has unfolded during the semester. Each party, then, writes a specific report according to the template questions included later in this Handbook.

These reports are to be carefully discussed between parties before being sent on to the Lecturer in Ministry Practice who will read them carefully for the sake of assessment, taking summary notes that will then be returned to the student. Ideally, a three way meeting between the student, supervisor and LMP can take place at semester’s end, not as a means of further assessment but a chance to hear first-hand what learning has taken place

If a disagreement arises between the parties around final reports, this can be noted for later discussion with the LMP. If it is a serious disagreement, the LMP can obviously be contacted immediately for the purpose of mediation. Such ‘surprises’ can be avoided if a covenant of honesty and accountability is established at the outset of the supervisory relationship and maintained throughout its life.

It is also important to note, in accord with the Host Agreement Form, that a placement can be terminated on the advice of the Host executive. In other words, if the placement is not working from the Host perspective, the student will be withdrawn by the LMP with due explanation and on-going counsel.

## The Significance of the Learning Covenant

What makes ministry a vocation is not the idea that all who are called to it are ordained to the priesthood or pastorate, or that it is full time and life-long; what makes ministry a vocation is the charisms that constitute the practice...

Kathleen Cahalan

At the outset of the Placement the student is required to draft a learning covenant that will help shape and best integrate them into the envisaged ministry context. The word 'covenant' is deliberately used because it represents more than a contracted agreement. Ministry is relational, and as such, deeply reliant upon trust, justice, love and loyalty. Before writing, the student is invited to reflect on three interrelated aspects of their coming placement.

The first relates to the ministry setting and social context into which the student is soon to enter. What, then, are the discernible characteristics of the community's life and mission that need to be taken into consideration when drafting a learning covenant? Second, what gifts and competencies does the student bring that will further compliment that life and mission? And finally, what gaps in learning and experience can be creatively addressed within the placement period?

The final two questions focus on the educational and vocational needs of the ministry student. This is a key consideration given that the placement, even if it is already stipended and contracted, needs to be a genuine learning experience. SFE is certainly not ministry supply! In fact, the ministry (community) setting will need some prior education about this. It is also very helpful, if not necessary, to ensure that a Commissioning Service is held at the outset of the placement which liturgically reinforce this vital point of learning and correspondingly, a Decommissioning Service be held at the placement's conclusion to signify the learning period has ended.

Questions to be mindful of, then: What are the gifts of Christian ministry that require my expression and repeated practice? What are tasks that need to be trialled and reflected upon to see if they are in accord with my gifting and calling? What are the formational issues in need of addressing so I might to serve in the most congruent, effective and fruitful ways?

The drafted learning covenant is then developed in the cyclical patterns already mentioned:

- *Intentional/imaginative planning*
- *Skilful and artful practice*
- *Critical yet soulful evaluation of the various ministry tasks*
- *Renewed planning with repeated practice in mind*

The final draft of the learning covenant will represent a consolidation of the orientation / observation phase and is to be submitted to the LMP by the end of the fourth week of the semester. It will be a signed agreement framed around nominated and clearly negotiated areas of ministry practice. Obviously, prior negotiations need to have taken place with the student's supervisor and key local leadership if the supervisor is not on site.

So while the learning covenant steers the student on to a structural path of learning and remains the basis for evaluation and final assessment, it remains an evolving and living document in keeping with changing circumstance and new discovery. A healthy learning covenant (and a healthy student for that matter) will be notable for numerous revisions and redirections, all in light of careful theological reflection, feedback and probing self evaluation.

## Writing a Learning Contract

Virtues are dispositions of the heart, but they also guide our decisions and determine how we act. Thus we grow in virtue by performing virtuous acts. We become more compassionate by acts of compassion, more humble by acts of humility, more generous by acts of generosity.

Gerald M. Fagin, SJ

The following section deals in more practical detail with the process of shaping up a learning covenant. **Remember, the listed illustrations are examples only!**

- 1.** In light of ministry areas or directions in need of practice, the SFE student is first invited to *frame a broad and general Learning Goal* in relation to their placement. It is best an imaginative and bold goal without being in anyway grandiose or impossible to achieve! eg *I want to learn how to be a minister who consistently seeks and offers life-giving graces of Christ.*
- 2.** From such a deliberately broad and 'intrepid' heading then flows (thinking in terms of a flow chart) three or so specific **Learning Objectives** in relation to a number of well-considered ministry areas, such as preaching, mission planning and delivery, worship leading, Christian education, pastoral care or social advocacy. For example, if the learning objective is related to leading worship: *I want to learn to be an engaging and spirited worship leader, open to both the spiritual needs of the community and the leading of the Holy Spirit.*
- 3.** It is then a matter of shaping up concrete **Ministry Tasks** in line with the various learning objectives, listing resources that can make the objective a practicable and accessible reality. Again, with worship leading in mind: *"I will lead worship every second week at Good God Church, planning in close collaboration with the Minister of the Word, the designated worship leader and the Music Director. So far as learning resources are concerned, I will observe the Minister of the Word at Good God Church and reflect with her about her own evolving experience of leading worship. I will read at least two recently published books on the practice and theology of worship and will endeavour to write various components of the service such as the Prayers of Confession and Assurance of Forgiveness, Prayers of the People, seeking to incorporate sung responses into them."*
- 4.** Finally, written or oral **Evaluations** from the student's reflection forums (or beyond) can be sought and discussed, as well as journaling and theological reflection in light of them. Seeking feedback can be a challenging exercise, particularly when it is sought for vulnerably demanding leadership. However, thorough and constructive responses are the stuff of genuine reflective learning. Students may care to use the specific examples of feedback templates included in the back of this Handbook or frame their own according to the particular ministry area or circumstance under consideration.

In sum, the student's learning covenant is developed via the following five steps:

- 1.** Make a list of the ministry areas in need of practice or experiment and able to be practised within the ministry setting or context.
- 2.** Shape up a broad and bold learning goal for the SFE unit.
- 3.** Frame a set of specific learning objectives in light of each nominated ministry area.
- 4.** List concrete ministry tasks specific to each specific learning objective.
- 5.** Formulate a thorough process of evaluation and/or feedback for the specific ministry tasks.

### A Learning Objective Example Within the Learning Covenant<sup>3</sup>

Worship Leading	
<b>My Learning Objective</b>	I want to learn to lead engaging, participatory and moving worship services, and learn to conduct the sacraments and other pastoral services with due competence, reverence and missional application.
<b>Ministry Tasks</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>1.</b> In consultation with the minister/supervisor, to be thoughtfully rostered for worship leading across the placement period, in keeping with the above learning objective. I will find out who I need to be in contact with re worship planning and efficiently practice establishing those key contacts by way of phone, email or in person. I will take responsibility for times and dates of planning meetings, and undertake to lead them if it is appropriate to do so.</li> <li><b>2.</b> To observe the community and its leadership at worship for at least two weeks before my first rostered service, taking notes and following up with the local leadership and my supervisor as to why things happened and where they happened in the service. I will also note my responses, good, bad or indifferent, and share these with my supervisor.</li> <li><b>3.</b> I will attempt to write some of the prayers and experiment with their usage and place in the service. I will meet and consult with the Musical Director about how music is normally chosen, yet will remain open about the possibility of matching my prayer and liturgical choices with music/ lyrics that I think will work well with the theme or lectionary readings.</li> <li><b>4.</b> I will do some recently published reading around worship practice, in particular around the place of language and metaphor in a post modern age. I will also source and read through the various Uniting Church sacramental and pastoral services in relation to the Church's mission to the world. I will discuss my thinking and discoveries with my supervisor in the hope that my reflections will further inform and energise my worship leading practices.</li> </ol>
<b>Evaluation</b>	<p>To hand out worship service evaluation sheets, seeking well considered feedback from willing participants, my MRT and Supervisor. I will consistently check these against, and perhaps frame the questions in light of, my stated learning objective.</p> <p>I will view the recorded DVD of the services I conduct and make my own evaluation in light of my learning objective.</p> <p>To write regular journal reflections on my own experience of the services I conduct, noting pre and post service feelings and moods.</p>

<sup>3</sup> Please note that this example is but a small component of a learning covenant. It is not exhaustive, nor designed to prescribe any learning objective, rather to illustrate how to develop an integrated learning process for a specific ministry area.

## The Art of Theological Reflection

Theological reflection is the discipline of exploring individual and corporate experience in conversation with the wisdom of a religious heritage. The conversation is a genuine dialogue that seeks to hear from our own beliefs, actions, and perspectives, as well as those of the tradition. It respects the integrity of both. Theological reflection therefore may confirm, challenge, clarify, and expand how we understand our own experience and how we understand the religious tradition. The outcome is new truth and meaning for living.

Killen and de Beer

### Introduction

#### Every student is a hermeneut or theologian!

The word “hermeneut” is related to the ancient Greek myth of “Hermes,” the winged messenger and bringer of divine perspective to the human world. Hermes was not only a deliverer, but also a translator of messages. He had to know the language of the gods as well as the intricacies of the human vocabulary in order to fulfil his purpose, eg, to help human beings grasp the will of the gods. Those who translate one language into another in today’s world are called “interpreters.” When we talk about “hermeneutics” as part of Christian theology, we mean the discipline of interpreting and describing the character of God’s presence, activity and purpose within the many contexts, milieus and seasons of life.

#### Hermeneutic practice is the practice of theological reflection

The Gospels inform us that Jesus interpreted God’s will afresh for humanity by virtue of his preaching, teaching and healing, death and resurrection. The gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost enabled the early Church to interpret the known scriptures and faith narratives in a very new light. The Spirit’s activity was from then on regarded as central in the process of discerning God’s presence and will. As we engage in the process of reflection and do so in the given of a soulful faith; we enter into the intentional practice or better still, art of theological reflection.

This art, above all else, requires a person to step back from an event or experience and reflect upon it in a methodical, albeit prayerful way. As mentioned, we don’t simply learn from an experience, but from reflecting deeply on the experience in its totality. As a ministry practitioner reflects on a pastoral experience or related event, the different aspects of personal, theological and practical dimensions begin to emerge. Questions, such as, what just happened, how did it happen, who was involved, how did it affect me (positively, negatively, not at all), what does this mean, how might God been at work in this particular situation and what can I now learn from all this for future practice sake?

**An effective method and regular practice of theological reflection will challenge and progressively free up a person’s “embedded theology.”**

Religiously minded people often respond to life experiences with perceptions, attitudes and assumptions that arise out of what Howard W. Stone and James O. Duke call “embedded theology.”<sup>4</sup> An embedded theology is gradually formed through the ready adoption of very familiar, yet often non-critiqued models of community meaning and purpose.

Similar to this ‘prior-knowing’ disposition is what Killen and de Beer describe as a ‘stance’ within ministry and life that predominantly expresses either self-assurance or a certitude, each being a resistant, though not impenetrable barrier, to true faith exploration<sup>5</sup>. Arguably, the exploratory trajectory of faith practice was consistently the teaching emphasis of Jesus, often in conflicted relation to the religious practitioners of his day and age. The Kingdom of God was, and is, ultimately a space of humble exploration, not self-righteousness or certitude of belief (Luke 18:9—14).

On the positive side, though, an embedded theology can signify the collective wisdom of a Christian community, spelled out in one-sentence-statements, such as “God is love,” “All shall be well,” “Christ is with us,” or “the Spirit will guide us into truth.” Faith expressed as embedded theology emerges out of sets of defining and encouraging beliefs, often in the face of difficult and complex circumstances.

As a negative, an embedded or ‘certain’ faith can restrain a person from seeing new possibilities or fresh ways in which God is present to the world. Embedded theology can be an interpretative looking glass through which a person only sees what they want to see. The hazard of such theological frameworks, is that they rarely challenges a person to step out of their comfort zone and expose themselves to the mystery or incomprehensibility of God, which in itself is a great energy for renewed learning and love. The celebrated Christian martyr, Deitrich Bonhoeffer once wrote that the task of genuine theology was to, “preserve God’s wonder as wonder, to understand, to defend, to glorify God’s mystery as mystery.”

Real and complex life events – those weekly experienced within a faith community – confront fortified convictions. When a child dies of cancer, when a bread-winner is suddenly disabled by a car accident, or when a person of no professed faith continues to outshine one’s own qualities of love and compassion, making sense of these can – and should – critically challenge long held faith perspectives.

Indeed, an embedded faith can be thrown into crisis and felt to be inadequate or of little value. It is then that a more inquiring and searching approach to interpreting God’s activity and presence is required. Through the process of theological reflection within a supervisory relationship, a person can explore not only the familiarity of embedded thinking, but also identify its inconsistencies and limits. The intentional process of inquiry and reflection can result in new insights and an expanded understanding of the Christian life and God’s (mysterious) saving presence within it.

---

4 Stone, Howard & Duke, James. *How to Think Theologically*. 2nd Edition. 206. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.

5 Killen, Patricia O. and de Beer, John. *The Art of Theological Reflection*. New York: Crossroad. Chapter 1: *Theological reflection nurtures growth in mature faith by bringing life experience into conversation with the wisdom of the Christian Heritage. To practice theological reflection we must be able to pay attention to and enquire about the meaning of our individual experiences, our world, and our religious heritage. The standpoints of certitude and self-assurance block our ability to do so. The standpoint of exploration supports it. Transformational theological reflection takes place in the standpoint of exploration.*

Although the ministry student will usually reflect theologically for the purposes of their own learning and growth, there may well be times when they are called to accompany others on this uncertain, yet enriching road. This is another reason why it is important for the student to be thoroughly familiar with a working method of theological reflection. It is not only a priceless gift to theological students but the Church as a whole!

### Practicing Theological Reflection: Faith & Life Connections

At the heart of theological reflection...are questions about the relationship of theory to practice, and how to connect theological discourse about the nature of God to the exercise of faith...Christian practice is not simply about the duties of congregational ministry (for example) but the entire life and witness of the Church. It is predominately a critical, interrogative enquiry into the process of relating the resources of faith to the issues of life.

Graham, Walton & Ward

As stated above, by entering into an intentional practice of theological reflection, the student will inevitably become more conscious of the limitations of their own embedded or inherited theology, therefore be challenged to articulate new ways of talking about God's redeeming presence and activity. Taking this process seriously results at best in new faith connections, eg, a vital link between what the student knows to be true of God, Scripture and other aspects of the Christian tradition.

The liturgical writer, Don Saliers, describes this as a "passional" way of knowing. In other words it is a knowing (and unknowing) forged in personal, self authenticating experience. The word "passional" is also suggestive that it is learning by way of facing and enduring human limitation, sin and suffering – the passional journey of Christ, no less – and is not an optional extra so far as any Christian disciple is concerned.

### Theological Reflection and Intentional Growth

If we understand challenging life events to be growth opportunities, we also need to acknowledge the place of disorientation, even grief, due to the loss of a person's interpretative or faith frame work. If the process of theological reflection is well engaged and supervision is reliably wise and supportive, such disorientation can be transformed into new and life-giving perceptions of God, self, others and ministry practice itself. And once integrated, such new insight can readily result in a broadening of faith and sense of vocation, as well as a deepening of love for the church's ministry and mission to the world.

The following faith stages are descriptive of the changes that often take place as a result of entering willingly into the practice and processes of theological reflection:

- 1. Acknowledging disorientation/dissonance.** The critiquing/open questioning nature of theological reflection will often lead to the breakdown of current interpretative frameworks of belief and practice. This can cause anxiety and disorientation in a student that may call for specialised pastoral support<sup>6</sup>, particularly if the student's peer group and networks of family or friendship fail to understand. Irrespective of this possibility, experienced supervisors can gently lead and support students through this stage.

---

6 Spiritual direction, in particular.

2. **Developing a new interpretative frame work.** Theological reflection powerfully enables a person to rebuild vital frameworks of belief and practice. These can give renewed vision and energy to the Christian life as they continue to intersect with one another.
3. **Establishing respectful connections between the old and the new.** Theological reflection helps to discover connections between old and new interpretative frame-works. The former do not need to be held in contempt, they simply need to be seen as a vital stage in the journey toward wholeness.
4. **Being open to new experiences and new meanings.** The poet, T.S. Eliot wrote, "We shall not cease from exploration and at the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time." This, in a nutshell, is the unfolding experience of theological reflection in conversation with a life-long learning of ministry practice.

### Internal and External Dimensions of Experience

Each ministry experience has external and internal dimensions. The 'internal' dimension refers to what happens *within* the practitioner in light of ministry practice, ie what are their thoughts, feelings, fears, hopes, reactions and responses? Although not necessarily visible to the outside world, these are real and often most pressing to the one experiencing them.

The external dimension consists of all the important 'givens.' e.g., the place, time of day or season, the kind of illness or sequence of an accident, the size of the home, the medication, the number of people present in a room, etc, etc. Both internal and external dimensions need to be given adequate space and honouring within the practice and art of theological reflection. They are two sides of the same coin, each instructing or informing the other in dialectic, creative discourse.

### Which experiences are suitable for theological reflection?

An experience to be considered for theological reflection needs to be specific, current and of personal significance to the student<sup>7</sup>. *Grist for the mill*, in other words. Significant events, though, do not always manifest in exciting or highly visible form. Sometimes they simply consist of a hunch, a glimpse or a lingering affect that might otherwise be lost or dismissed in the business (or busyness) of ministry. Thoughtfully considered through the wide lens theological reflection, they may nevertheless prove to be truly defining moments of insight and continued formation. Indeed, they may be critical moments that carry within them the seeds of future practice in more conscious and healing forms.

### What kind of questions can be asked?

There is no one single set of questions or a framework of approach that captures all facets of theological reflection. However, there are fundamental aspects to any ministry practice that are vital to address. The following sequence – *The Ministry Practice Event, Theological Reflection on the Event, Learning from the Practice and Future Implications for Ministry Practice* – is a proven one for good and fruitful reflection.

---

7 See Robert Kinast. 1996. *Let Ministry Teach, A Guide to Theological Reflection*. Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press. pp. 2–3.

The following number of questions may seem overwhelming at first. You may certainly choose the ones most relevant to the event being reflected upon.

### **The Ministry Practice Event**

What happened? Where and when did it happen? What was your ministry responsibility and to whom were you immediately accountable? What was its purpose in relation to your learning contract? Who did and said what? What was the outcome? What was your response to the event as it happened? What were your thoughts/feelings at that time and now?

### **Theological Reflection on the Event**

What are the possible theological themes explicitly or implicitly at play within the ministry event? Were you able to discern the presence and work of the Spirit in this situation? If yes, in what way, if not, why might that be so? What are any faith-based convictions you brought to this situation? In what way were they helpful or unhelpful? Are there any biblical texts or stories which could assist you in explaining a possible meaning or invitation to personal and professional growth within this event? What movement of Spirit are you able to discern within in relation to this particular event?

### **Learning from the Practice**

Viewing the ministry practice (and the personalities involved) with hindsight, would you have liked to have said or done anything differently? If so, what, and why? Were your own theological understandings challenged or unsettled at any time? If so, in what ways, big or small? What have you learnt about yourself as minister as a result of this event? What have you learnt about those you are seeking to minister? What have you further learned about ministry practice in light of this event? What have you further learned about the character and nature of God because of it?

### **Future Implications for Ministry Practice**

This is a very important conclusion to the reflective exercise that leads directly back into the **re-practice** of ministry tasks. Therefore, what things might be done differently next time around and what attitudes and disposition will you seek to embody in the practice of such ministry? What are the skill and formation areas that I am being invited to address now, and how will I practically go about addressing them?

### **What Methods and Sources can the student use within the Practice of Theological Reflection?**

The student is given a freedom in the choice of materials they use to interpret ministry events. Beyond personal experience and developing insight, the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures, alongside other authoritative writings in the tradition of the Church are helpful and enriching resources. Poetry, visual or written narratives from contemporary culture can also shed new light on an event. The listed text in the Select Bibliography, *Theological Reflection: Methods*, is both a helpful and lucid resource in this context. It is well worth a read.



Photo: John Pfitzner

## **An Example of Theological Reflection<sup>8</sup>**

### **The Ministry Practice Event**

Last week I went to visit an elderly woman in an Aged Care facility. When I entered the room, I noticed that the curtains were closed and the light was dim. She was resting on her bed. I tentatively entered the room and asked with certain insecurity, "Is this a good time to visit, Mrs B.?" She lifted her head and replied with a rather tired voice, "Oh, Jane, come in, I was just resting for a while but it's lovely to see you. Open the curtains and pull up a chair." I did and we began to talk.

I asked her how she was and she told me that she had been quite down. Her daughter from Darwin had cancelled a long-planned visit. Mrs B. had so much been looking forward to seeing her two grandchildren whom she had not seen for nearly two years. Now that the visit had been cancelled, she felt more lonely than normal and she was tired and sad for most of the day. Then she couldn't sleep at night, was lying awake and thinking about her life and her family, agonising about her isolation and how far she was away from everyone.

I asked her about her children. Her face lit up and she told me that she had five, all of whom lived interstate, were married with children and lived busy lives. She and her husband had moved to Adelaide twenty years ago due to her husband's job but now that he had passed away, it was only her, and she missed her children and grand-children terribly.

A few years back when she was still fit and healthy, she had been travelling around Australia to see them all at least once a year. But now she couldn't do it anymore and they didn't have the time to visit their mother in Adelaide. It was also too expensive.

Her lively face turned sad again. A few tears rolled down her cheeks. "I'm sorry," she said, "I am just complaining today. It's no joy to be around me. Maybe you want to come back another time, when I'm in a better mood?" I replied that I hadn't come to visit her to be cheered up and that I was happy to sit with her, however sad she might feel. I also said that I felt really sorry that her daughter wasn't coming. "That must have been a real disappointment?" She agreed and relaxed a little because she didn't have to pretend. She then changed the subject and talked about a painting class she was going to go to in a short while. She showed me some of her art work and I was very impressed with her colours and designs. Her voice sounded much happier when I said good bye. I promised that I would come back in a few days and see how she was going.

As suggested, I felt quite insecure at the onset of my visit. I wasn't sure whether I was disturbing Mrs B. Also, she seemed a bit withdrawn at first. I almost felt like an intruder. But when she invited me in, I relaxed a bit and settled into the situation. When she talked about her family I was really sad for her. I could imagine some of her loneliness and for a minute I started thinking about my own aging Mum. But then I brought myself back. I tried to really hear what she was saying and not avoid the uncomfortable things.

A little later when she talked about her grandchildren I felt like running to the phone and telling them to come. I didn't do that, of course. I think I was listening pretty well during the conversation, except for the couple of times when I was distracted with my own thoughts. I really felt for her. I didn't try and redirect her feelings of sadness. I affirmed her and told her that I was sorry. And amazingly, she felt better after that. When she showed me her art work I was

---

8 Originally authored by Rev. Dr. Beatrice Panne. Edited for subsequent publication.

genuinely astonished of how bright and beautiful it was. I also felt relieved that she was thinking about something positive now. She looked forward to her class.

Now that I have time to think about her situation I am somewhat disheartened by the distance between herself and all her family. I wonder whether or not to involve the staff or even some of her family members to tell them how she is doing and how lonely she feels at times. I'm not sure what to do with that idea. Maybe I need to speak to my supervisor about that.

### **Theological Reflection on the Event**

I think there were two kinds of issues at play here: One is related to her family situation and how she feels about it. There is loneliness, maybe even hopelessness, not feeling loved and cared for by the people she cherishes, maybe even feeling forgotten by her family. Underneath all could even be a fear of death, or a fear to die alone. I am not sure about this because she did not openly mention this to me.

On the other hand, we talked about her painting classes and her art work. There was a real love of life sparkling in her eyes. She takes joy in beauty and she is really creative. When I think of her family situation, a Psalm of Lament comes to mind, for example Psalm 13, where the psalmist complains:

"How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I bear pain in my soul, and have sorrow in my heart all day long?"

I wonder, though, whether an experience of God can ever replace the closeness and safety an elderly woman can feel with her own family. When I think of her artistic ability and her delight in beauty and colours I want to choose a Psalm of praise, like Psalm 104, where the psalmist says:

"You cause the grass to grow for the cattle, and plants for people to use, to bring forth food from the earth, and wine to gladden the human heart, oil to make the face shine and bread to strengthen the human heart."

And I want to add, "...and creatively give joy to a lonely woman's heart."

I would like to talk to Mrs B. about God or raise the question of who, or what, she believes in when I talk to her next time. I will also pray for her and for myself, so I will be really present to her when I see her next time. I think Mrs B. is not a Christian. Therefore, I am unsure whether or not to offer her a prayer or maybe read a Psalm with her. Since this was my first visit with her and time ran out pretty quickly, I did not have the opportunity to speak with her about that. I was not particularly aware of God's presence during our conversation, yet in hindsight, I think, that the moment when I affirmed her sadness was a moment of real closeness between us. I think Mrs B. felt genuinely understood. I could readily regard this as a moment where God's love for her was palpably present.

### **Learning from the Practice**

In general, an area of new learning that opens up for me is pastoral care for the elderly. I imagine that many elderly men and women who live in care facilities experience the loneliness and maybe fear of death that I intuited in Mrs B. I would like to be more discerning and skilled in my pastoral care.

More specifically, Mrs B. seemed to lack family contact. I don't think I imagined that. There may be ways in which I could initiate more contact with her family. If she had access to a computer with a camera and speaker system, she could maybe talk to her grandchildren over the internet. I wonder whether the aged care facility has computer and if I am in a position to even suggest something like this?

I am also thinking of the pastoral care team in my church. Maybe they could put her on the visiting list and befriend her more long term. That may ease her loneliness a little. I will address this issue with my supervisor. Also, I think, that I may have to do some more thinking about how to talk with someone about God who is not a Christian. I am not sure at all of how to approach that situation.

### **Future Implications for Ministry Practice**

In light of what I have seen and learnt, I feel strongly that I need to read more about the pastoral care of the elderly and perhaps speak directly to a supervising chaplain about the numerous issues this event has raised for me.

An important by-product of this experience has been the ambiguity of such ministry, I mean, how reliable is my assessment of people and things? I do need to grow in my openness within such situations and look for the little things as well as the major; body language and even what is going on for me as I listen.



## **The Writing of Presented Material**

### **Writing of a Journal/Diary Entry**

In keeping a ministry learning journal, the following suggestions for guiding entries may prove useful.

Date and time of entry.

Reference to the general learning goal and specific Learning objectives of the current learning contract.

The ministry task through which the goals are to be met.

Narrative, reflective evidence that indicates a positive, intentional movement toward fulfilling the learning objectives.

New areas/horizons for thought and reflection that have been opened up as a result of the particular experience.

Vocational sensibilities affected by the experience. Are there strong feelings of joy, fulfilment, hope or despondency?

Perceptions that the life and mission of the community or agency setting have also been changed or broadened by the student's learning experience.

What issues (theological, spiritual, missional, pastoral) continue to be raised by this learning experience?

### **Writing a Verbatim Report**

#### **Listening**

Creating, as best as one can remember, a word-by-word record of a pastoral conversation requires a student to exercise the art of "fine listening", ie, to be focused and attuned to what a person may be sharing or expressing. Fine listening includes attention to what is spoken audibly, but what may be said between the lines through body language, and what even may have been left unsaid!

Yet fine listening also calls for an ear to yourself, that is, your own internal soundings, thus the movement of Spirit. To enter into a pastoral conversation with a conscious stance of self-other-Spirit awareness, makes it more likely that the Spirit's work may be discerned.

## **Recording the Conversation**

Before the recording of the conversation some minimal information about the person, situation, circumstances or reasons for the pastoral encounter need to be given. Thus the first paragraph is headed "**Context.**"

**The conversation** is then written down from memory. There is no expectation that such a record is equal to a tape recording. It is the re-collection of the conversation that really matters.

Therefore, not all of the conversation needs to be recorded, rather the sequences that were of particular interest or note. It may have been a part that dealt with theological questions or involved painful memories. In any case, the moments within the conversation that remain clear and interesting are the most fruitful ones to record and analyse.

## **Analysis**

The verbatim is then followed by a **reflective analysis** of the conversation.

What are the points of joy, interest, unease or concern the student feels about the encounter?

What might be the pastoral issues, either articulated or implicit?

What are the spiritual themes or theological questions expressed or implied in relation to God, self, others, creation, ministry, life or health?

Were there any ethical concerns or boundary issues worth pursuing?

Were there difficult, revealing silences in the conversation? If so, what did they mean?

Did the student experience any significant mental, emotional or spiritual movements at any time during the conversation? What were those movements about? Did they contribute to the conversation in any way?

Did the student have a sense of the presence of God or the prompting of the Spirit at any time? How so and how did it effect the conversation? Are there any particular scriptures or other authoritative texts/narratives within the tradition of the church which could shed more light on this pastoral encounter?

## **Future Learning**

What has the student learned from this pastoral interaction? What are the implications of this learning for future pastoral encounters?

In writing up the verbatim report, the student needs to address all four steps of the process.

## **Preparing a Case Study**

### **Background Material**

Brief description of the client physically and personality

Approximate age

Family situation

Work situation

If ill, what is the diagnosis?

If terminally ill what is the prognosis?

What did you know of the client before you visited?

What was the purpose of your initial visit?

Describe the setting of your visit.

### **The Body of the Case Study**

How would you describe your relationship with the client?

What were the issues presented by the client? eg, personal problems, social problems, psychological problems, a spiritual dilemma, biblical/theological concerns or no discernible problem at all.

How did you deal with the issues raised?

What resources did you draw upon to enable you to work with the issues?

Are there any issues that have not been dealt with above?

### **Conclusion**

How did you feel you exercised your ministry in Christ?

What more would you like to have done or what more will you do?



## Contract Between Supervisor & SFE Student

This covenant should be completed, signed and forwarded to the College's Ministry Practice Coordinator within the first two weeks of Semester.

### Adelaide College of Divinity/ Uniting College for Leadership and Theology

34 Lipsett Avenue, Brooklyn Park. 5032.

#### Lecturer in Ministry Practice:

Rev. Sean Gilbert

8416 8432

#### Learning Contract for MINS 2528, 2529, 2530, 3516, 3517

**Student:** Name: \_\_\_\_\_  
Address: \_\_\_\_\_  
Tel. No.: \_\_\_\_\_ Email: \_\_\_\_\_

**Supervisor:** Name: \_\_\_\_\_  
Address: \_\_\_\_\_  
Tel. No.: \_\_\_\_\_ Email: \_\_\_\_\_  
Role in relation to Placement Settlement: \_\_\_\_\_  
Accreditation from: \_\_\_\_\_

**Placement:** (congregation, institution, agency): \_\_\_\_\_  
Address: \_\_\_\_\_  
Tel. No.: \_\_\_\_\_ Email: \_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Responsible Office Bearer: \_\_\_\_\_

**Arrangements for Supervisory Meetings:** Weekly/Fortnightly

on \_\_\_\_\_ (day) at \_\_\_\_\_ (time)

Place: \_\_\_\_\_

**Dates of Placement:** From \_\_\_\_\_ To \_\_\_\_\_

**Proposed date for submission and discussion of the Final-Placement Reports:**

\_\_\_\_\_





































## A Select Bibliography

Bass, Dorothy & Dykstra, Craig (Ed's), *For Life Abundant: Practical Theology, Theological Education and Christian Ministry*. Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2008.

Bolton, Gillie, *Reflective Practice: Writing and Professional Development*, 3rd Edition. Los Angeles: SAGE, 2010.

Cahalan, Kathleen A., *Introducing the Practice of Ministry*. Collegeville, Liturgical Press, 2010.

Connor, Benjamin T., *Practicing Witness: A Missional Vision of Christian Practices*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2011.

De Beer, John & Killen, Patricia O'Connell. *The Art of Theological Reflection*. New York, Crossroad, 1994.

Floding, Matthew (Ed.), *Welcome to Theological Field Education!* Herndon, Virginia, Alban, 2011.

Graham, Elaine, Walton, Heather, Ward, Frances. *Theological Reflection: Methods*. London, SCM, 2005.

Kinast, Robert, *Let Ministry Teach: A Guide to Theological Reflection*. Collegeville, Liturgical Press, 1996.

Palmer, Parker. J., *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation*, San Francisco, Jossey-Bass, 2000.

Purnell, Douglas, *Being in Ministry: Honestly, Openly, and Deeply*. Eugene: WIPF& Stock, 2010.

Stone, Howard W., Duke, James O., *How to Think Theologically* (2nd Ed.), Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2006.

Ward, Francis., *Lifelong Learning: Theological Reflection and Supervision*. London, SCM, 2005.

Whitehead, James & Whitehead, Evelyn, *Method in Ministry: Theological Reflection and Christian Ministry*. Lanham: Sheed & Ward, Revised and Updated, 1995.





**Uniting College**  
for Leadership & Theology

For enquiries contact  
Lecturer in Ministry Practice  
Rev Sean Gilbert

**p:** (08) 8416 8432, 0419 271 137

**e:** [sean.gilbert@flinders.edu.au](mailto:sean.gilbert@flinders.edu.au)

**w:** [www.unitingcollege.org.au](http://www.unitingcollege.org.au)

**a:** 34 Lipsett Terrace  
Brooklyn Park SA 5032

2015 Revised Edition

---