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## Field Based, Supervised Theological Education

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# Field based, supervised theological education

Churches expect exceptional leadership from their pastors to lead in the ministry and mission of their local congregation. Every time a new pastor is appointed to their church, many members hold their breath, praying that their new leader will rise up to their expectations. When ministerial interns enter their first parish, they hope that their training has prepared them for the demands they know they will face in their new appointment. Whether or not the ministry of individual congregations will be adequately directed and nurtured, and the new appointees will fulfill their mission to their local communities, depends largely upon the level of excellence achieved in the ministerial formation and training.

The preparation of pastors for ministry has gone through several learning cycles. The training process has transitioned from offering very little formal training to requiring multiple degrees for graduating ministry trainees.<sup>1</sup> Some training traditions have shifted from a strong emphasis on practical pastoral skills to an emphasis on the mastery of theology and biblical languages. Other ministry training establishments have sought a balance between wholly practical and wholly academic preparation for ministry. In this article, we will examine current forms of ministry formation at Avondale College in Australia, and

consider what key competencies employing churches are looking for in their pastoral staff.<sup>2</sup>

### Avondale's vision and model for ministerial formation

Avondale has been training ministers for more than 100 years. Our graduates have served as missionaries, evangelists, pastors, and church administrators throughout the world. Our vision has always been to offer students a participative ministry training process from which spiritual maturity and pastoral professionalism can emerge as key factors in preparing them for a lifetime of caring, sharing, and empowering ministry. In recent years, we have sought to refine that vision to meet the need that exists in churches for a balanced, participative leadership. Like many other theological training centers, Avondale places each of its students in a local church where, under the supervision of a seasoned pastor, they are able to develop their ministry skills in a variety of differing ministry situations. The supervised field education process at Avondale takes the academic, biblical, and theological content of the classroom and links it with the student's personal faith, passion, and spiritual giftedness in order to create opportunities for ministry development in the practical arena of a local congregation.

How has Avondale enriched this process for students? What do ministry trainees learn from their church placements that is essential for effective pastoral and administrative leadership in a local church? How can it be tailored for the benefit of ministry formation in similar training contexts around the world?

### Action-reflection-action model

Avondale's supervised ministry practicum program combines elements of contemporary adult experiential learning processes<sup>3</sup> with the method that Jesus exemplified in the training of His disciples as He engaged them in a variety of ministry-learning experiences. The process acknowledges that, while most adults generally have a preferred learning mode, they learn best from being involved in an *action-reflection-action* type learning experience. The following process indicates how this method is achieved.

1. *Action*. Throughout their ministry preparation, trainees are placed in a congregation where they are engaged in a variety of concrete ministry experiences in a manner similar to that followed by Jesus as He introduced His disciples to ministering to others.<sup>4</sup>

2. *Reflection*. Jesus, in the training of His disciples for future ministry, set aside time for them

to reflect on their recent ministry experiences. This helped them to process the theological and sociological implications for their ministry involvement. In a similar manner, pastoral supervisors assist our ministry trainees in contemplating and reflecting on the theological and experiential implications of their recent ministry experiences. For example, they are encouraged to reflect on where and how God has been at work in each experience. They may reflect upon what biblical story, parable, image, or symbol might come to mind. This reflection can illuminate their understanding of what might have happened during the ministry experience. They may also ponder how lecture contents or readings impact the situation. What biblical teaching or doctrine is relevant to this ministry experience? How well have they connected with the needs and concerns of the person or community to whom they have been ministering?<sup>5</sup>

3. *Action.* As ministry trainees reflect theologically on recent ministry experiences, they gain important insights and understanding into what they personally contribute to ministry and how they have responded in different ministry situations. This opens opportunity to consider how they might adapt and apply what they have learned to their future ministry.

Jesus gave His followers opportunity to plan for and apply in their future ministry what they had previously learned from past ministry experiences. In the same way, the insights gained from a reflective re-enactment of a recent ministry event are used to help current ministry trainees consider how similar ministry situations might be approached in the future.<sup>6</sup>

Trainees are also encouraged to consider what God is showing them from this present experience that might have bearing on similar, future experiences. Furthermore,

consideration is given to the kind of changes in manner, personal style, or address that might need to happen in their lives so as to enhance their future in ministry. Have recent experiences highlighted inherent human weaknesses that are limiting their capacity for ministry? Is there a call for greater dependence on God's grace to impact them if their future ministry is to be more effective?

### **Wholistic ministry formation in a field partnership**

Experiences gained in the practical arena of the local church are considered a vital and integral part of the ministry formation curriculum at Avondale. The supervised field education process, intentionally structured, provides balanced, true-to-life ministry situations that will prepare our trainees for future effective pastoral leadership among church congregations. The

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# SIGNS OF THE TIMES®

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following factors indicate how we expect to achieve our expectations:

1. *Self-understanding.* Being involved in supervised field education in a congregation offers trainees firsthand opportunities to assess their aptitude for ministry. Taking on leadership and pastoral responsibilities in their church assists them in acquiring valuable self-understanding and dependence upon God for success in future ministry. Trainees become aware of the strengths they bring to ministry in terms of

their future ministry. As they reflect theologically on these experiences, and seek to understand them in the light of Scripture, culture, history, and through interaction with other members of their Christian community, it helps them to make sense of these experiences.

3. *Mentoring by experienced pastors.* Crucial to the success of field education includes engaging experienced supervisors who can establish open and supportive working relationships with their

understanding about ministry goals, relationships, appropriate boundaries, workloads, and responsibilities with their trainers. This would then be summarized in a formal trainee-supervisor contractual agreement. Throughout the duration of the field education experience, trainees are able to observe various church leadership models being demonstrated in the way their supervisors conduct their ministry.

As modelers and mentors, supervisors assist trainees in

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their calling, spiritual giftedness, commitment, spiritual formation, character, personality, temperament, leadership ability, and experience. By contrast, they also become aware of those areas of their lives that need particular attention and nurture if, in the future, they are to become fully effective, transformational leaders in a local church.

2. *Learning to reflect theologically.* For it to be authentic, a personal cognitive knowledge of God needs to be affirmed and established within the social and ecological context of everyday life. Avondale's ministry trainees are challenged to reflect theologically on the many situations they experience in the course of their ministry among church members and to ask what they might learn for

trainees. Communicating clear ministry objectives and expectations becomes crucial. Supervising pastors are selected for their maturity and experience in ministry and their cooperation and commitment to mentoring trainees for lifelong ministry. Avondale is indebted to the conference leaders who select experienced pastors for the surrounding churches. Avondale's Field Education directors maintain regular dialogue with these supervisors. We conduct empowering training sessions where input and discussions on vision, spirituality, ministry training, supervisory skills, resources, information, changes to curriculum, and individual trainee development and progress are shared.

When first placed in a congregation, trainees establish a mutual

developing their own unique pastoral, evangelistic, and leadership identities. As they offer direction, encouragement, support, counsel, and model a variety of church pastoral responsibilities, supervisors facilitate the development of an authentic, personalized ministry in each trainee. By assigning ministry tasks appropriate to their maturing leadership skill levels and assisting them in achieving experience and depth in their assigned ministry tasks, trainee competency develops and matures.

A final important aspect of the supervisor-trainee mentorship is a monthly interview and debriefing session where the discussion focuses on the wholistic ministry formation of the trainee. Based on a prepared verbatim report of a

recent ministry experience, trainees reflect with their supervisor on their progress in ministry and analyze God's role in both their spiritual and professional development.

4. *Opportunity for experimentation.* In supervised field education, trainees are given firsthand opportunities to test their developing ministry skills in the real-life environment of a local congregation. Within a local church setting, they can build breadth and depth into their ongoing preparation for future ministry as they experiment with the biblical and theological concepts they have grappled with in the classroom. Within the nurturing surroundings of their hosting congregation, trainees find the generally supportive and encouraging climate provided by their local church to be the ideal place to come to terms with the types of spiritual, sociological, cultural, theological, and pastoral issues that typically confront those occupied in full-time pastoral leadership. Having the support of their supervising pastor to assist them in reflecting upon their ministry performance makes the trainee's church placement a healthy environment to learn and prepare for future ministry.

5. *Developing their relationship with God and family.* Whatever our students' expectations might be for their future in ministry, involvement in supervised ministry formation creates a realistic environment where their relationship with God can be nurtured. Within the local church, the kind of relational experiences that form part of everyday Christian ministry provide a place where God's calling to ministry can be confirmed and trainees can serve others in Christ's name. Such interaction with people in a variety of life experiences provides a depth of self-understanding and serves to remind trainees of their need to rely on God for wisdom and grace to minister to others with empathy and love. Involvement in the real-life environment of pastoral ministry also encourages trainees to see the need to carefully manage their time and set aside periods each day to strengthen their spiritual relationship with God and others.

6. *Developing experience in basic ministry competencies.* Dividing ministry training between the classroom and the congregation has real benefits. The finer points of ministry are caught as much as they are

taught. Instruction in each of the key areas of ministry, with their accompanying competencies, is structured into the course, giving trainees the opportunity to engage them at the theological and sociological level in the classroom and the experiential level through their supervised field education. Avondale's theological field education focuses on six key areas of ministry formation, and in each of these areas we have identified various ministry competencies. We expect that trainees completing the course will have reached proficiency in each of the competencies. The following is a summary of the six focus areas in ministry training accompanied by the various competencies engaged by the trainees.

1. *Personal development:* Spiritual formation, call to ministry, ministry attitude, personal health, time and resource management, role expectations, self-understanding, self-discipline, reflection and integration, personal values, and personal boundary formation.
2. *Building relationships:* Relating to peers, relating to church members, creating church

## Student interview

Kelly Fry graduates this year from Avondale College. She has been mentored by three pastors and two churches during the past four years.

*Kelly, what have been the benefits of your church placement?*

I've been able to see what pastors do and how they work. It has helped me grasp how I would do ministry. I have learned what to do, what will work for me, and what I don't think will work for me even though it may work for

others. It has helped me focus my learning on how I can prepare now for full-time ministry.

*What ministry factors have impacted you the most?*

The way pastors need to adapt to different styles of church and relate to diverse people appropriately. When I identify some of their great skills, I ask them how they developed them. A church placement is really getting a feel for what full-time ministry is all about. It

helps me look for things in class that I know I can use.

*How have you known that God is with you as you are involved in ministry activities?*

I have really felt God's presence in my life. In performing different ministry tasks, I have found I know where God wants me to be. Being with a church has kept my sense of calling relevant and alive. I feel honored that God wants to use me in this way.

community, cross-generational relationships, relating to authority, cross-cultural relationships, family relationships, community relationships, conflict resolution, marriage perspectives, and authentic sexuality.

3. *Proclamation*: Proclaiming purposefully, proclaiming through teaching, preaching with immediacy, preaching with variety and focus, preaching a range of sermon genres, preaching for decisions, preaching with passion and momentum, preaching with media technology, and communicating cross-culturally.
4. *Pastoral care*: Pastoral attitude, pastoral visitation, caring for new members, caring for nonattendeers, caring for the hurting, caring for the unchurched, crisis intervention, and mentoring.
5. *Evangelism and discipleship*: Meeting the community, evangelistic mentoring sessions, reaching the unchurched, individual Bible studies, discipling new Christians, small group Bible study, evangelism planning, evangelistic preaching, and baptismal preparation and planning.
6. *Leadership*: Pastoral leadership, leadership style, worship leadership, small group leadership, management and administrative leadership, team leadership, visionary leadership, and facilitating change.

These six focus areas intentionally prioritize the ministry skills graduates will need for full-time Adventist ministry. Students experience these competencies in either their church or the classroom.<sup>7</sup> Avondale has designed processes

and opportunities for each trainee to experience some competency in each of these skills. By providing this framework for their life-long learning, Avondale prepares them for continuing maturation of their diverse ministry gifts. Our goal insures that many of the hopes parishioners have for their new pastors can be met.

The preparation of Adventist pastoral leaders requires our best practice. Partnering with dedicated, experienced field pastors vastly enriches our students. Their modeling and mentoring are foundational for ministerial formation at Avondale. Our *action-reflection-action* model integrates content and process in an intentional student-orientated learning experience that creates vital ministry formation. This ensures that wherever God calls our graduates, they have the necessary foundations to minister to a rapidly changing world. ☑

1 Brian Harris, "Defining and Shaping an Adequate Theological Curriculum for Ministerial Training," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 36 (Summer 2009): 157-168.  
 2 Avondale has moved from offering a BA to offering a BTh/

BMin. The double degree provides majors in Theology, Biblical Studies, and Church Ministry.

- 3 David Kolb, *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1984). Kolb developed a model of experiential learning in which he recognized that adults learn best when they seek to solve their own work-based issues. Through the interplay of theoretical knowledge and reflection, learning becomes self-directive and effectual.
- 4 Matt. 9:35-38; Mark 10:13-16; Luke 12:1; John 4:1.
- 5 Mark 6:30-32; Mark 8:27-29; Mark 9:28-31; Luke 8:9-11; Matt. 16:24, 25; Luke 12:22; Luke 24:27.
- 6 Mark 3:14, 15; Luke 9:1-6; Matt. 28:18-20; John 20:21, 22.
- 7 Avondale has eight church ministry units to which these are appropriately assigned: Spiritual Formation for Pastoral Ministry, Communication and Worship, Ministry in Practice A, Ministry in Practice B, Preaching in Ministry, Evangelism in Practice A, Evangelism in Practice B, and Marriage and Family Ministry.

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