

**Pathway Possibilities:  
The Lilly Endowment's Pathways for Tomorrow Initiative  
Steven Chambers, Daniel Poole, Andrew Turner, and Christina Zaker<sup>1</sup>**

INTRODUCTION

(by Christina Zaker)

What does it take to dream big? Creative people filled with hope and determination. But what does it take to transform those dreams into reality? All of that plus the critical influx of financial support.

Over one hundred schools received just this type of financial support for their creative dreaming in the phase two funding of the Lilly Endowment's Pathways for Tomorrow Initiative. As their website states, these grants are "designed to help theological schools strengthen and sustain their capacities to prepare and support pastoral leaders for Christian churches."<sup>1</sup>

As each school creatively explored new ways to prepare pastoral leaders, many focused on the theological field education component of their pastoral leadership development. The infusion of these Pathways for Tomorrow funds allowed schools and theological field educators to take a step back and evaluate their current operations and consider the important questions of What else? What more? And how better to achieve their goals? Below are three summaries that highlight the creative effort put into motion at three different theological schools. This is just a small sampling of the various initiatives, but they invite each of us to consider our own assessment of what works well and where things can be improved in theological field education.

A couple of highlights to note:

Steven Chambers points out that Vancouver School of Theology sought to gain a "clear and accurate picture" of the current state of its Theological Field Education

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Steven J. Chambers is Interim Director of Theological Field Education at Vancouver School of Theology, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada. Email: [schambers@vst.edu](mailto:schambers@vst.edu). Daniel Poole is Assistant Professor for Ministry Formation at Bethany Theological Seminary, Richmond, Indiana. Email: [pooleda@bethanyseminary.edu](mailto:pooleda@bethanyseminary.edu). Fr. Andrew Turner is Coordinator of Pastoral Formation at Saint Mary Seminary, Cleveland, Ohio. Email: [aturner@dioceseofcleveland.org](mailto:aturner@dioceseofcleveland.org). Christina Zaker is Director of Field Education and Assistant Professor of Pastoral Ministry at Catholic Theological Union, Chicago. Email: [czaker@ctu.edu](mailto:czaker@ctu.edu).

program. Through an impressive collection of extensive interviews, surveys, and research with a consultant at their side, the school discovered what it means to take the time to do a deep assessment of a program.

Daniel Poole notes the effort to respond to signs of the times in our world by building on Bethany Theological Seminary's distinctive tenet of peacemaking. Their project set out to explore how best "to prepare students to lead congregations in embracing diversity and facing divisions." This is a critical skill set for any theological student. They also model what it means to be grounded in an institution's unique tenets as the driving force of creative change.

Andrew Turner at St. Mary Seminary turns the lens slightly to look at the critical role of supervisors and supervisory communities. Their grant seeks to ask how field education can contribute to forming pastoral leadership teams, enrich and strengthen collaborative models of parish pastoral leaders, and create formational materials that can be shared with other parish and seminary communities. This grant was a collaborative effort between St. Mary's Seminary, the National Association of Lay Ministry, and the Catholic Association of Theological Field Education.

Each of these grants offers a unique lens into the questions of how field educators dream big and transform those dreams into reality. Our hope is that any school who focused their Pathways for Tomorrow grant on the area of field education will be willing to share what they have learned with other field educators through this journal or future Association of Theological Field Education consultations. The wisdom gained through these projects will ripple out to communities and theological schools in a multitude of ways.

## VANCOUVER SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY LEADERS FOR A NEW DAY

(by Steven Chambers)

The Vancouver School of Theology (VST) is a multi-denominational theological school located on the campus of the University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada. With an historic and deep commitment to three church partners (the Anglican Church of Canada, the United Church of Canada, and the Presbyterian Church in Canada), VST is also increasingly relating to a growing constituency of evangelical churches who find that the school reflects their values of engagement with the big questions, contemporary justice challenges, and key theological commitments out of which such engagement arises.

Working within the VST mission "to form and educate thoughtful, engaged, and generous Christian leaders" in concert with school's interreligious and Indigenous studies, our phase one research in the Lilly Pathways for Tomorrow program focused on theological field education (TFE). We sought to gain a clear and accurate picture of the current state of the VST TFE program (including its strengths, challenges, and

opportunities) through extensive interviews, surveys, and research. The consultant on the project, the Rev. Anthony Robinson of Seattle, conducted over fifty interviews with students, field education supervisor-mentors, graduates, denominational directors of formation at VST, other denominational leaders, VST faculty, and directors of field education at other schools in North America. In addition, sixty-four responses to online surveys were received from people in these same categories.

Through this initial research, VST learned that there is much that is excellent in the school's TFE program and much that our recent graduates have appreciated. We have also learned that there are programmatic and structural changes that could be made to the TFE program, including course redesign, enhancements to the preparation and accountability of supervision, and a more proactive role for students in site selection. This initial work led us to wonder how we might more effectively integrate TFE into the whole curriculum, including connecting points with our interreligious and Indigenous programs. We also became aware of the need for the support of lay ministry vocations and the identification of 'thriving congregations' where our students might best learn from well-prepared and skilled mentors and the lay people who minister alongside them. From our location, we see several critical realities facing theological schools broadly and VST in particular:

- an increase in part-time students (now over 60%) within a growing student population
- an increase in part-time ministry positions in the churches, with the result that mentors are finding it a challenge to offer time to student mentees
- a renewed awareness of lay ministries and the preparation required for them
- the need to continue strong online delivery models combined with in-person teaching, building on our experience before and during the pandemic
- TFE, although particularly challenged in the pandemic, also exhibited strong resilience; however, it was the stronger students who found creative and adaptive ways to tap into experiential learning
- changing needs for ministry leaders as identified by the denominations, which are themselves experiencing profound institutional change
- the significant need of immigrant church communities in Canada for contextually appropriate leaders
- effective TFE requires the initiative of the student adult learner but also relies on the excellent preparation of mentors, the careful selection of TFE sites that are "flourishing" or "best practice" congregations or non-congregational ministries, and the key involvement of lay leadership

- there are thriving communities of faith in many places, urban and rural; we need to work with partners to identify these communities so that we might learn from them
- financial support of students and mentors in field education needs to be considered

Through a process of extensive collaboration, research, and program development in phase two, VST will revise and renew its TFE curriculum, strengthening courses and field-based experience through the selection of sites that evidence “flourishing” and “vitality” or “best practices,” the professional development of supervisors, and the enhancement and involvement of lay leadership at field sites.

We see this consultative process as an ecology of partnerships—a model of working with the three historic denominational partners, and others, to discover and build on common areas of mission and ministry. While we hold differences, we will seek to build on common values, intentions, and visions to strengthen the overall TFE program and its component parts. This endeavor will be in specific response to the need to prepare and support pastoral leaders for Christian churches in the future. We are aware of the fragility of Protestant denominations generally and of many communities of faith particularly, especially as we begin to move out of the pandemic. We recognize that the work we have ahead will need to enhance trust among our constituencies in the partnership as we seek to rethink experiential theological education.

#### BETHANY THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

#### EMBRACING DIVERSITY, FACING DIVISION: THE BRIDGE-BUILDING PROJECT OF BETHANY THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

(by Daniel Poole)

I believe my Association for Theological Field Education and Australian and New Zealand Association for Theological Field Education colleagues would agree with me that the past two academic years have been difficult to navigate. Certainly, theological education in general faced many challenges introduced by the COVID-19 pandemic conditions. But one could argue that it was felt most acutely by those of us who are charged with field education at our institutions of higher education.

But with great challenge comes the opportunity to think in fresh new ways about how we are doing our work and engaging our students. The pause that has been the pandemic has required us all to imagine new pathways and more flexible means by which our students can enter, complete, and thrive in field education placements.

Despite the complexities of the moment, none of us were willing to relent regarding the crucial nature of this action-reflection model of education. So, we have been nudged in the direction of innovation and developing resilient students who are able to live into these new realities.

For some of us, this has been coupled with a terrific opportunity provided by the Lilly Endowment to really lean into the work of reimagining theological field education as we seek to prepare ministerial leaders for the bold work that lies ahead for a changing society and church. At Bethany Theological Seminary, the lone seminary for the small Church of the Brethren denomination, we decided to build upon peacemaking as a distinctive tenet of our theological heritage and imagine how that might help us shape leaders for this emerging paradigm. As one of the historic peace churches, we decided to focus our work of reimagination on how peacemakers might have an impact in a world that is growing progressively more divided and even hostile to difference. We wanted to consider how ministerial leaders might be able to step boldly into the work of reconciliation and building the “beloved community,” as Martin Luther King Jr. so famously invited us to all dream of as a possibility.

The purpose of our project “is to prepare students to lead congregations in embracing diversity and facing divisions. The central goals are increased community along lines of diversity and improved communication across lines of division—both in our seminary and in congregations where our graduates become pastors. In a word, we want to learn and teach ‘bridge-building.’”<sup>2</sup>

Theological field education, or what Bethany calls ministry formation, serves as the foundation of our MDiv degree program and is central to the preparation for ministerial leadership as the core component of our curriculum. In considering how this process might be re-tooled to meet this audacious goal of bridge-building, the grant allows Bethany Seminary to fund and create a new position to expand the horizons of our current field education design to include an administrative faculty person who “will be responsible for developing field education placements that summon students to work on issues of diversity and division.”<sup>3</sup>

As we imagine this new coordinator for ministry formation and community engagement role, we expect this staff person to explore the development of field education sites that focus on bridge-building in local municipalities for the sake of forming a more diverse and inclusive church community. We can also imagine the potential impact of a peacemaking focus that creates field education experiences for congregations that are experiencing division over theological or political issues. Additionally, we expect the work of this new coordinator to allow for an increase in the scope of our field education placement network to include sites that exist within the nonprofit and parachurch organization sectors.

As we seek to build practices that allow our students to practice these bridge-building exercises, the grant will also allow the professor of ministry formation to continue piloting a developing partnership with faculty at the New Brunswick Theological Seminary. This collaboration is designed to have ministry students from both schools engage in several cross-seminary classroom discussions centered on diversity and improving communication across lines of division.

There are obviously many details about our work and the scope of the redesign that cannot be encompassed in an article of this length. Suffice it to say, we have our work cut out for us. And, we are excited to step into the work and are grateful for the resources of the Lilly Endowment grant, which makes it all possible.

## SAINT MARY SEMINARY PROGRAM OF PARISH FORMATION

(by Fr. Andrew Turner)

The most recent guiding document for Roman Catholic seminary formation states that “pastoral formation depends in great measure on the quality of supervision. . . . When onsite pastoral formation is seen as an integral part of priestly formation, then pastoral staffs must accept a special responsibility.”<sup>4</sup>

Despite the best of intentions, the parish staff within field education placements are not always equipped to fulfill the special responsibility of accompaniment and supervision of seminarians, deacon candidates, and lay ecclesial ministers. Yet it is these individuals within parish field placements who are often best positioned to contribute to the formation of leaders because of their ability to model the strong supportive relationships and mutual understandings to which these ministers will be assigned after their formal education is completed.

To bridge this gap, Saint Mary Seminary in Cleveland, Ohio, is developing a program of *parish* formation through the generosity of the Lilly Endowment Pathways for Tomorrow grant initiative. This project will have a threefold impact:

First, a strategic approach to forming pastoral leadership teams with the methods and practices of ministerial supervision. By actively including the parish staff in the student’s formation process, all participants will be equipped with better collaboration skills for their respective roles as leaders. The result of this initiative will be a pathway for vibrant growth that best prepares students for future responsibilities of leading and collaborating in parishes.

Secondly, a pathway for parish pastoral leaders to be enriched and strengthened in their collaborative work with each other. Successful field placements serve as vibrant models for field educators and other graduate seminary programs and dioceses across the country since most focus exclusively on formation of the ministry student and not the field sites.

Finally, the creation and distribution of best-practice formational materials that reflect the changing parish ministry contexts (e.g., multicultural, multi-location) will reduce the financial burdens for countless seminaries and theological schools that are currently attempting to establish vibrant pastoral field education placements for their students.

Together with professional associations such as the National Association for Lay Ministry (NALM) and the Catholic Association for Theological Field Education (CATFE), Saint Mary Seminary is continuing its long history of developing tools and resources for students that impact their formation personally, academically, spiritually, and pastorally.<sup>5</sup> Results from these past collaborative projects have shown that new leadership programs, centered in parish field experiences, need to be continuously developed to reflect the variety of new ministry environments that are emerging in today's church. These new programs must address the increasing complexity of parish structures, new languages, and new cultures and the increase in significant social justice ministries such as outreach to the sick, the poor, the homeless, the immigrant, and those with special needs.

The timing of this project is ideal because for forty years Saint Mary Seminary has placed field education as the hub of pastoral formation, requiring students to have a variety of field education assignments before graduation. This emphasis, coupled with several years of on-the-job training, provides ample time for students to internalize their learning and better prepares them to effectively serve the church. However, with ever-decreasing time between graduation and beginning leadership of one or more parish communities, a more strategic and collaborative field formation program is needed that reflects this increasingly diverse reality of ministerial life.

In addition, fostering collaborative relationships among students and parish pastoral leadership teams is a pressing challenge. Many of NALM and CATFE's members are parish leaders who have opportunities to share ministry with students who are placed in their parishes. The seminary, NALM, and CATFE are committed to learning about the strengths and challenges of these collaborative relationships and sharing this best-practice knowledge with the wider church.

While the approach needed in one parish may differ in some ways from another parish, there are foundational collaborative skills that can make all field placements more enriching for the students and the parish leadership. Many seminaries and theological schools across the country are trying in their own ways to equip students with parish-based ministry skills. These efforts embody distinctive approaches because of differing theology and ecclesiology and differing diocesan, seminary, parish, and program expectations. This proposal seeks to affirm the theological programs and parishes where pastoral leadership teams have already found ways to be supportive and to assist field education placements to be more effective by better aligning them with the expectations of the Program of Priestly Formation and the most recent research by NALM titled "Priestly Formation in Collaboration with the Laity: A Vision of the Vatican Congregation for the Clergy."

The proposed project will assist parish field education programs in having greater consistency in their formational outcomes and will support parish leaders in the skills needed for collaborating with their assigned students.

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<sup>1</sup> “Pathways for Tomorrow Initiative,” Lilly Endowment Inc., <https://lillyendowment.org/pathways-for-tomorrow-initiative/>.

<sup>2</sup> Bethany Theological Seminary, “Embracing Diversity, Facing Division: The Bridge-Building Project of Bethany Theological Seminary,” proposal to the Lilly Endowment, 25 May, 2022.

<sup>3</sup> Bethany Theological Seminary, “Embracing Diversity, Facing Division.”

<sup>4</sup> United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Program of Priestly Formation*, 6<sup>th</sup> ed. (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference Publishing Services, 2022), 371.

<sup>5</sup> National Association for Lay Ministry, “Priestly Formation in Collaboration with the Laity: A Vision of the Vatican Congregation for the Clergy,” 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (2019), [https://cdn.ymaws.com/www.nalm.org/resource/collection/690A8004-2C2F-48FC-8D2A-232E41420CB1/Priestly\\_Formation\\_with\\_Lay\\_Collaboration\\_-\\_final.pdf](https://cdn.ymaws.com/www.nalm.org/resource/collection/690A8004-2C2F-48FC-8D2A-232E41420CB1/Priestly_Formation_with_Lay_Collaboration_-_final.pdf).