

Core Practices in Education for Ministry

The terms “education” and “ministry” in Education for Ministry frequently need unpacking to better understand both the content and the purpose of the program. Some expect EfM to be a course in religion or theology, like one that might be taught at their local college or university. Some expect it to be geared toward preparation for becoming an ordained minister or pastor, for such is the limited understanding of ministers in contemporary culture.

EfM actually is neither of these, although it does provide an education in the content of the Christian tradition through reading the Bible alongside some basic biblical commentary, church history, and practical introductions to Christian theology and ethics, as well as through encouraging an appreciation for ways in which Christians respond to encounters with those of other faiths. EfM also explores a wider concept of ministry, based as it is in an understanding that baptism, the fundamental rite of entry into Christianity, marks our call to minister to one another in Christ’s name in the course of our daily lives.

At its heart EfM is a program in practical theology, a program based in a set of five core practices that form and support us in the various ministries to which we are called.

- **Living in Community**

All ministry begins in relationship, and at its best is reciprocal. As we each share our own stories and listen attentively to another’s stories, we come to know each other and the relationship deepens. Empathy deepens, and out of that empathy I minister to you even as you minister to me.

In EfM we begin the year by sharing a focused portion of our spiritual autobiographies. As we listen to one another we may find points of common experience and points at which our empathy is awakened. Sharing spiritual autobiographies forms a foundation on which we build relationships for working together in community through the year. As we continue to share stories of personal experience, name concerns and positions, offer varied expressions of worship, and acknowledge deep spiritual truths and longings, we deepen our connections to one another and actively look for ways to bridge differences that might otherwise separate us. EfM uses the Respectful Communication Guidelines and the Mutual Invitation process from the Kaleidoscope Institute as tools for learning to acknowledge and respect those differences.

- **Regular Prayer and Worship**

EfM expects that weekly worship in the meeting, usually with members taking in turn responsibility for leadership, is a component of the seminar group’s work together. Spiritual practices are addressed in the EfM curriculum, particularly in Unit Three, but also across the year through the introduction of practices from the Christian tradition like *Lectio divina*, the Ignatian examen, contemplative prayer, and walking a labyrinth. Participants are invited to explore entering into these traditional practices and encouraged to write a Rule of Life.

The different expressions and practices of worship shared weekly by members of the group offer ways to enrich individual spiritual practice, as do trial explorations of different practices from the tradition. In addition, participants are encouraged to be regular in attendance at worship and active participants in congregational life. The goal is to develop a spiritual connection with God and neighbor that grounds and sustains us in the work of ministry.

Education for Ministry is a program in the Beecken Center of the School of Theology at the University of the South.

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- **Theological Reflection**

Examining life through a theological lens is the central spiritual discipline in Education for Ministry. The seminar groups practice theological reflection (TR) employing EfM's model that brings four sources of wisdom into conversation, using a method in four movements that lead to new understandings with implications for action in practicing ministry in daily life.

The four sources in the EfM model include three that form our context in daily living: life experience ("Action"), the culture/society around us ("Culture"), and our cherished beliefs and values ("Position"). The fourth source is the Christian tradition handed down over the centuries ("Tradition"). EfM's method for bringing these sources into conversation with one another follows four movements: 1) *identify* a focus from one of the sources for reflection; 2) *examine* the focus; 3) *connect* it to the other three sources; and 4) *apply* new learning to shape action in ministry. In movements two and three, questions are framed using an intentional theological focus.

Using EfM's process for theological reflection often feels awkward at first, yet few expect to be able to play a musical instrument proficiently or master an athletic pursuit without practice. The same is true for spiritual disciplines. With sufficient practice in TR comes the ability to slip seamlessly into bringing the lens of faith to bear on any aspect of life, essential to aligning our behavior with what we say we believe. When faced with making an ethical choice, regular reflective practice can enable one to answer the question: "How do I know this is a faithful way?"

The process for theological reflection is addressed in Unit Two every year with the expectation that theological reflection is practiced weekly (or nearly every week) thereafter in the seminar groups. The curriculum also instructs participants in practicing theological reflection as individuals outside the seminar meeting, with the goal of becoming reflective practitioners of their faith in daily life. Simply put, any seminar group that neglects the practice of theological reflection is not participating authentically in EfM as the program is designed.

- **Study of the Christian Tradition**

A series of four Reading and Reflection Guides provide weekly assignments for reading, reflection, and response that encourage groups to develop a lifelong practice of engagement with the Christian tradition in study. Participants read the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament along with commentary that helps them understand the texts in their ancient and modern contexts. They study the history of the church. In the final integrative year participants study Christian theology, examine their own personal theologies, consider ethics through the lens of the Anglican tradition, and read first-person stories of interreligious encounter.

In addition, the Reading and Reflection Guides offer contextual themes that shape ministerial formation over four years, viewing the study of the Christian tradition through lenses of personal and global contexts for our ministry in daily life as we grow in spiritual maturity and live into the journey with God. The regular study of the Christian tradition in EfM forms a foundation for theological reflection in the service of faithful living.

- **Vocational Discernment**

Listening for and responding to God's call to ministry in daily life is a practice that undergirds the whole EfM curriculum. It is assumed that all Christians are so called. In the group we begin with attentive listening as we share spiritual autobiographies and continue listening through shared prayer and worship, shared stories of our daily lives, shared theological reflection across the year. Through such listening we often find we can help one another identify specific gifts and the deep moments of longing or joy that may signal a call to a ministry in which the person can offer those gifts. As individuals the practice of regular prayer opens us to listening for God's call, a call that we can take to the community for reflection and support.

Responding to God's call is shaped by the regular practice of attention to personal and community contexts. What are the needs of the community around me? What gift can I offer? Attention to the fruits of theological reflection will shape response as well. What implications for my own or others' action in ministry can be taken from this TR? What are the next steps? What or who will be needed to support me in this response? How can I support you in your call? The seminar group becomes a community of affirmation, support, and accountability when regular attention is paid to vocational discernment with and for its members.