

## **Abigail Johnson: Personhood of the Learner: A Response to “Thinking about One Order of Ministry”**

I read the proposal paper, “Thinking about One Order of Ministry” (TAOOM), with interest. It prompted reflection on my initial vocational discernment, education, and ministry experience. I engaged in a discernment process even before the United Church required discernment. I was an active lay leader in my congregation. I engaged in Ignatian Spiritual Direction. I was praying, reading, and reflecting with a spiritual restlessness. Was this restlessness a call to a vocation of “paid accountable ministry” or a deepening of my present sense of call? At the time, I felt called to my vocation as musician and educator. As a layperson, I was participating in God’s vision and mission through my work in the world. Yet, in my congregation, people said I had gifts for congregational leadership.

As part of my discernment, I explored educational options. I met with representatives from the Center for Christian Studies (CCS) and Emmanuel College. I saw merit in both paths yet I decided to pursue studies at Emmanuel College. Although CCS offered a viable educational process, I wanted opportunities for further study. I did pursue doctoral studies as well as many continuing education opportunities.

My background gives a framework for two thoughts on the TAOOM paper. First, the paper asks a question about educational requirements for ministry. “What forms of educational preparation are required for ministry leadership in the church today and into the future?” (p.1) I believe that the church will never find one single form of education to prepare anyone for the present or future church. No single structure of education whether content-driven or process-driven will completely fulfill the needs of future congregational leaders. Instead, focusing on the personhood of the learner is essential. First, clear evidence of a thirst to learn about God, people, and the world is required in those who feel called to leadership. Second, along with this thirst for learning, a hunger for life long learning is a necessary ongoing commitment to leadership development. I use the terms ‘hunger’ and ‘thirst’ as deliberate spiritual and theological references to communion where we fulfill our hunger and thirst for God’s grace in a table feast. For me, communal life and congregational leadership are an extension of that grace.

Looking back on my discernment process, I remember my thirst for learning. I based my call to congregational leadership in an active life in the congregation. Such a life included Bible study, theological reading, prayer, and worship leadership. I read theological and spiritual books, then offered study group sessions. My personal congregational experience was formative. However, it did not prepare me to serve a wide variety of congregations within the larger United Church. By integrating personal experiences with educational approaches, I broadened my perspectives. In the area of theology, I discovered a range of historical and contextual perspectives. Studying the Bible gave me scholarly approaches as preparation for preaching and teaching. Church history opened up a world of understanding of historical and current political situations. I experienced accompanying a person in palliative care. Yet my pastoral studies gave me a theoretical base for that experience. With every area of study I consolidated my learning. As a result I shifted my vocational identity from congregant to congregational leader. I drank deeply from a variety of learning approaches. However, my thirst for learning was evident to others before I began any educational process.

An ongoing hunger to learn has framed further studies and continuing education. Even with years of experience and lots of education, learning on the job and listening for God's Spirit are constant. In today's ever-changing context, being a life long learner is essential for ministry leadership. Educational preparation will not offer everything needed. Learning on the job, or being a reflective practitioner, is essential for congregational leadership. The TAOOM paper recognizes that because the church "carries God's Word into the world in new ways, ministry will be characterized by more collaboration, networking, and transparency as well as a variety of educational approaches" (p.5). Despite a variety of educational approaches, what's at stake is the personhood of the learner. As someone who has taught candidates, I have experienced a vast spectrum of learners. I have known those with no background or personal knowledge of congregational life. Yet convinced that God has called them, they say, "Who are you to question that call [through education]?" On the other hand, I have experienced those with a large amount of personal knowledge of congregational life. But they believe they have nothing more to learn. Either way, I do not hear a hunger and thirst for learning.

Through my education and experience, I have developed an integrated process of action-reflection learning. I benefitted from theoretical and theological frameworks created by all the saints who have gone before me. I understood my place within a larger tradition. And so I have contributed to the cloud of witnesses through my own theoretical and theological writing. My hunger and thirst for learning continues.

Finally, the TAOOM paper emphasizes that this is a critical time "for the church to maintain an educated paid accountable ministry capable of equipping people to live out their faith in meaningful, loving, and mature ways" (p.3). I hope that our church does maintain an "educated paid accountable ministry." One way to do that is by offering incentives to those who thirst for learning and hunger for continuing education. For instance, schoolteachers receive increases in pay with further education.

The future of the United Church is just as mysterious as the future has always been. I hope that our hunger and thirst for God's creative spirit of learning will continue undaunted.

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