**Identity Refined: Exploration and Elucidation**

Nearly two and a half years ago, in my first official “reflection on ministerial identity,” I began to explore and express an understanding of my own design and desires regarding ministry. I voiced an evaluation of myself as a thinker and learner, a diplomat and peacemaker, a listener, an encourager, a helper, and a fighter for my convictions, connecting these traits of mine to the character of the God who created me. And I briefly examined areas of ministry to which I felt drawn—missions, teaching, and nonprofit work—looking at the ways I might be suited to such occupations, but also exploring the many uncertainties and doubts I had. That original reflection ended with this summary: “My ministerial identity at this point in my life has not yet been clearly articulated. I know who I am, but I do not yet know exactly where I want to go. So I continue in the process of prayer and discernment. I continue to discover more about myself and more about the possibilities. I continue to wait on God, and I wait actively by doing my best in the meantime to live faithfully as the created image of God.”

Much has happened since then. I *have* persisted in prayer and discernment while waiting on God, and God has been at work redirecting and refining me. It is easy to look back at who I was and what I was experiencing then and think, “That girl has *no idea* what she’s about to get herself into!” Since I can only begin to imagine where the continued process of formation will take me in the future, I would venture to guess that I will be expressing similar sentiments in yet another few years, when I look back at the reflections offered here.

The evaluation of myself that I presented in my initial set of musings on ministerial identity was not inaccurate or incomplete for the time, however. In fact, the intervening years have largely served to confirm my original assessments. But since as human beings we are never static, further experiences and reflections call for further and deeper contemplation, and the initial evaluation needs to be ­refined, much as my identity has been.

*Me, Distilled*

In my initial reflection on ministerial identity, I began to explore my calling by asking the question, “So who is it exactly that God has created me to be, and how is that identity a representation of the image of God?” I still hold to that instinct to look at myself as a reflection of God and discern my calling by doing so. In fact, the tendency has been reinforced under the spiritual direction of Kent Smith, who has helped me better understand God’s desire to knit together the body of Christ in ways that honor and educe the abilities of each member.

So over the past two and a half years, I have continued seeking to understand my own gifting and my place within the body of Christ. This has been a continual process, one in which I am repeatedly purified and transformed through my experiences until the essence of my identity and ministry is clear. It is, metaphorically, a process of distillation. And as the key components of my identity are isolated, those elements are more readily used as building blocks for progressively more intricate and elaborate endeavors, endeavors that are then generally successful because they are true to the elemental nature of my design.

**Activist, Caregiver, and Healer**

Over time, the distillation process has clearly revealed to me that I am—to put it succinctly in the terms of one informal assessment tool I like—an activist, a caregiver, and a healer.[[1]](#footnote-1) These are the ways in which I feel closest to God, most fully express my love for God, and most vibrantly love and serve the people of God. This is how God created me, and, if Kent is right (and I believe he is), this is likely how God desires to use me in service to the world.

Several experiences of the past two and a half years stand out as significant landmarks along the path of ministerial identity discernment that has brought me to this understanding. Taking Dr. Robert Foster’s class on *Justice in the Biblical Tradition* helped me understand my own passion for just living,[[2]](#footnote-2) gave me a richer and more resonant perspective on the gospel, and provided an opportunity for me to experience education and formation under the guidance of a superlative teacher. Being a part of the St. Ann Community since its inception in February 2010 and walking through the ups and downs of life together with my fellow community members as we seek to love and serve God has shaped me more than any other experience of my life. Working as a teaching assistant for Mike Cope’s freshman Bible classes for two years has provided an opportunity to explore teaching and has allowed me to dream about a future in that field. Participating in MRNA under the direction of Kent Smith has challenged me to think deeply about the nature and purpose of Christian community as well as my own role within it, at the same time both broadening my horizons and focusing my perspective. And collaborating in the formation and piloting of the undergraduate Missional Life Initiative (MLI) has helped me further understand my strengths and passions regarding spiritual formation and community, particularly my desire to serve as a spiritually formative presence in the lives of others.[[3]](#footnote-3)

All this and so much more has happened in just over the past two years. I am, then, a very different person than I was when I wrote my original reflections on ministerial identity. Or, more accurately, I am now more fully the person God created me to be than I was at that point, for these experiences have revealed many things to me about the ways God designed me and desires to use me. These are experiences that have, in a variety of ways, helped shape, illuminate, and confirm my design as an activist, caregiver, and healer.

The activist in me wants to take a stand for a just cause, call people (including myself) to a godly standard of intentional righteous living, and see the lives of the downtrodden changed for the better. As an activist, I care tremendously about integrity, and I fight for my convictions, which run deep. Since these convictions are also faith-based, the activist in me sometimes serves as a prophet, challenging the church to live righteously and justly and to change the world in the process. This part of me is especially passionate about spiritual formation and the transformation of people so that they reflect the image of God as they were designed to do so. This assuredly includes my own transformation, something I see happening primarily through the St. Ann Community. I love engaging in the pursuit of a just life with this community.[[4]](#footnote-4) We cannot fix the world, of course, but as a community and as individuals we try to testify to the justice of God in our own ways. One of the ways in which I like to witness is as a teacher and a spiritual guide, challenging my listeners to contemplate what it means to faithfully follow the way of Jesus. I love helping them understand the centrality of character and just action for our lived-out faith.

The caregiver in me is the nurturer, the listener, the encourager, the one who wants to create an environment in which people can flourish. I offer my time and my talents, particularly my capacities for teaching and listening, to help people grow and to help them feel valuable and attended to. As a caregiver, I also anticipate people’s (and groups’) needs and desires and try to meet them appropriately. Sometimes this means taking extra care as a teacher and mentor. Sometimes it means listening closely to someone who needs to talk. Sometimes it means that I am an advocate for those who cannot at the time speak for themselves. Sometimes it simply means that I am the one doing the grocery shopping and remembering whose birthday it is.

The healer in me is the one who has deeply experienced her own brokenness, who therefore easily sees and gravitates toward brokenness in others, and who knows that God alone can truly heal us. As a wounded healer, I recognize the depth of pain that accompanies many of life’s trials and disappointments, but I also know the resurrecting power of a faithful God. I walk with others who are hurting, helping them seek God and God’s understanding of themselves as part of the healing process. The healer in me is also a reconciler and peacemaker, attributes which frequently emerge to address broken interpersonal relationships. As one who is good at listening and can see many aspects of a situation, I often find myself serving as a translator between people who are not understanding each other or a mediator between those who are in conflict. By doing so, I help repair broken relationships so that they can flourish from a foundation of honesty, vulnerability, understanding, trust, integrity, and commitment. And since healers are needed in every aspect of life (for life is made up of broken people), finding opportunities to serve in this capacity is less of a challenge than finding time to rest from it.

**Learning the Questions**

A refined understanding of myself as an activist, caregiver, and healer is not all that the past few years have yielded for me, though. While my original reflections on ministerial identity were, as I mentioned previously, largely confirmed over the past two and a half years of life, learning, and ministry, those two and a half years have also revealed to me a few ways in which my reflections were lacking and needed to be refined. There are issues of identity I have been taught to examine and questions I have been taught to ask over the past few years that would not have come so naturally nor been so easy to answer at the time of my initial observations.

*Leaving Church to Find Church*

 For example, my first reflection on ministerial identity paid almost no heed to my ecclesiology. It very cursorily examined some of my experiences in the faith communities of my youth and my college years, but other than indicating potential employment opportunities related to the church at various levels, it did not consider the church. It left aside completely a few questions that are fundamental for any minister: What is my place within the church? And how do I envision myself moving forward in relationship to the people of God?

 When I wrote that reflection, I was only beginning to emerge from a place of deep cynicism concerning the church. I had had a number of difficult, even debilitating experiences in which the church had hurt me. From my perspective, these faith communities had failed miserably at their central mission: to live with integrity as people who reflected the image of God. And though when I moved to Abilene I was blessed to find a healthier church that provided a refuge for me as I began to heal, I was not yet in a good place to contemplate my relationship with the church when I wrote the initial draft of my reflections on ministerial identity.

Though I am sure the healing process is not yet complete for me, God has done good work in me over the past few years, particularly through the influence of people like Kent and faith communities like MRNA and the St. Ann Community. As I have explored what it means to be the church in these kinds of contexts, I have gained greater clarity regarding the inexpressible longings for the church that led to my cynicism in the first place. I have also regained hope and let go of much of that cynicism. My ecclesiology is now more positive, rather than reactionary.

Nevertheless, I still do not anticipate my vocation as a minister leading me back into a traditional church setting. Rather, I see it being carried out in the midst of the Kingdom as it is anticipated and depicted by communities like my own. I will not deny that God is at work in the midst of churches like those that fueled my disillusionment, but my place (at least unless God shows me otherwise) is within the expression of church often known as intentional community.[[5]](#footnote-5)

*A Woman in a Man’s World*

Likewise, that reflection on ministerial identity included only minute references to the fact that I am a woman—two quick nods (in ten pages on *identity*, for goodness’ sakes!) to my gender, and only then in the context of limitations imposed on me by my church culture.[[6]](#footnote-6) Whether the deficiency stemmed from good motivation or mere naiveté, I realize now that it is a sorry state of affairs when something so foundational to my being is relegated to such an inconsequential status. I hope to remedy the situation by offering here a more substantial and more constructive appraisal of how my gender and my ministerial identity intersect.

I am a woman—that is hardly a complex reality to perceive. Yet the ways in which my gender has affected my ministerial identity are quite intricate, and countless as well. I cannot but guess at what life and ministry would have been like for me had I been born male. In my own church tradition, that would have smoothed the way for me quite a bit. I would have had a great deal more affirmation, a multitude of opportunities extended to me, and far fewer questions, insecurities, and challenges along the way.[[7]](#footnote-7) I suppose only God knows whether that would have been for better or for worse in my life and in the grand scheme of the Kingdom.

As it is, however, I find myself a woman in a man’s world. I am constantly surrounded by male professors, male mentors, male ministers, male peers, and even mostly male community members and friends. I spent two days in class last weekend—with twenty men. Me. And twenty men. The testosterone permeated the atmosphere. And I do all right in this sort of environment. In all honesty, I am accustomed to it. And I generally enjoy the company of these good men, my fellow ministers. Yet the message that is sent, however unwittingly, is clear: I am different, not the norm. Ministry is the realm of men. True, times are changing. Now women are often (though far from always!) allowed and even encouraged to pursue ministry as a vocation. But those who are willing and able to brave the challenge of the stained glass ceiling are few and far between; being a woman in a man’s world is a lonely place to find yourself. As one of the meager number of women ministers I know, then, I face a weighty, expectation-laden undertaking, and I wonder at times if I am up to the task or if I will be allowed to succeed at it even if I am.

My reflections on gender as part of my ministerial identity should not be limited to challenges and frustrations, however; I also often find myself asking how life, how ministry, and how I and my calling are different—in good, important, even indispensible ways—because of my femaleness. I have had to discern my vocation carefully before pursuing it, for I knew there would be repercussions in my closest personal relationships and within my church.[[8]](#footnote-8) The two years I spent post-undergrad wrestling with my design and its implications left me firmly convinced, however, that ministry was not something I could avoid even if I tried. So I chose to embrace it, trusting in God to care for me and my relationships along the way. But because of the obstacles set before me going into ministry, I have developed strength, tenacity, courage, and conviction that I might not have had otherwise.

There are even certain ways in which my femaleness opens doors and equips me well. It allows me to minister, especially as a caregiver and healer, in certain situations in which a man’s presence would be a challenge or a hindrance, if not an outright impossibility. It allows me to bring a feminine perspective to conversations from which that outlook has been sorely lacking.[[9]](#footnote-9) It allows (requires?) me to set an example of excellence for those around me, to help them see that it really is possible and even beneficial to have women living out vocations to ministry and biblical teaching. Similarly, it allows me to inspire other women to follow God’s design for their lives, no matter where that may take them. In the end, though being born male may have made life in ministry easier, I am thankful to be the minister—the *woman*—God created me to be.

**Living the Already and the Not Yet**

So where does all of this leave me as far as discernment about and plans for the future? Particularly, how will the activist, caregiver, and healer in me come together in vocation to glorify the God whom they represent? I believe the kind of life I am heading towards looks much like the life that I am already living. This is not surprising, given the time I have spent over the past few years distilling my elemental design and using it as a foundation for life and ministry. The passions that I am currently pursuing and the ways that I am already investing my time and energy fit well with what it means for me to be an activist, caregiver, and healer in the Kingdom.

In the immediate future, I will continue my involvements at ACU. I have one further year of study left in my degree, and though that time will pass quickly, I do not want to neglect the riches it will hold by anticipating only what comes after graduation. There are still classes to take, things to learn, relationships to form and strengthen, and ways to be involved in the rhythms of ACU. Next year I will again teach freshmen non-majors Bible students, this time as the lead TA for Mike Cope and Rodney Ashlock’s classes, and I will also continue on as a leader in the MLI program, perhaps focusing more on teaching components that are in development for future cohorts. I can imagine that there will be a great deal for me to learn through a further year of experience in both of those environments, as well as through my own studies.

Both the immediate and distant future also include continued involvement in intentional community, particularly in the St. Ann Community, at least until God shows us otherwise. This community is my home. It is the source of my greatest formation as a person and a minister thus far. They are the people with whom I have been called to life and ministry, and though we struggle greatly at times to discern what that calling entails, we know that God has brought us together for a purpose. And if and when that purpose are fulfilled and God leads me elsewhere, it is my hope and plan for that “elsewhere” to include deep investment in intentional community, for I have learned in my time with the St. Ann Community that such relationships are essential for truly flourishing life that is a faithful representation of the Kingdom.

As far as a longer-term vision for ministerial involvement, I can easily and eagerly envision a future in which I am using my ministerial identity as an activist, a caregiver, and a healer to influence people for good and for God. Such a life would, of course, need to line up with my God-given design and my overarching values. It would need to be a life in which I am consistently seeking out and honoring the image of God as I find it all around (and within) me. It would need to involve healthy relationships in which I am a person of good news and integrity. And it would need to be an abundant, healthily balanced life.[[10]](#footnote-10)

There is one vision for such a life that I am particularly excited about, for it would allow me to attend to many of my passions all at the same time. It looks at bit like this: I am a member of a healthy, vibrant intentional community that is deeply engaged in sharing life together and being people of good news to one another and those around us. At the same time, I am pursuing my God-given talent for and love of learning, deepening my knowledge and wisdom regarding questions of mission, practical theology, justice, community, and spiritual formation. As I continue to learn, I also teach. I am a faculty member (full time, part time, adjunct?) in a university setting (probably Christian, given my interests), and I enthusiastically draw my students into the world of faith, as well as the highly connected realm of deeds.[[11]](#footnote-11) I invite them to join me in exploring my interests and encourage them to discern their own passions and to follow God’s leading for their lives. I am a spiritually formative presence in their lives as a teacher and also as a mentor and minister. As one well acquainted with discernment and spiritual formation, I can guide students as they seek to understand their own God-given design and desires. And as a long-term member of a well-established intentional community, I can encourage and counsel other individuals and communities, particularly fledgling communities, as they walk down the paths of formation, discernment, mission, conflict, and celebration that God leads them to.

*Confirmation and Question*

Such a future seems both attainable and enticing, and I have received a great deal of affirmation and encouragement as I have discerned this possible way forward. First, this life that I am envisioning is essentially an extension of my current way of life, which has itself been the result of much discernment. Second, if my experiences of the past few years are any indication, it seems I have potential as a teacher and a mentor. The evaluations of my students, teachers, mentees, employers, and collaborators indicate that I have been successful thus far in working toward those goals, and though I know I still have much to learn, they seem to believe in me. Third, involvement in a community of faith and mission is basically a non-negotiable for me. It will always be an important part of my life, and if that is the case, it only makes sense that that deep commitment influence my other involvements and relationships. And finally, those who know me best—community members, close friends, spiritual directors, family—have perpetually encouraged me to pursue a life like the one I have laid out above. They see in me the gifting and the strengths needed to be this person, often at the times when I doubt it myself.

That does not mean I have no fears or hesitations, however, or that I will not face challenges. I often wonder if I am up to the task of having the necessary breadth and depth of knowledge to teach excellently. The task is demanding and daunting… Sometimes I have a hard time motivating myself to write, particularly in an academic tenor. The process can be painstaking, especially if there are other, more desirable opportunities that I have to relinquish to endure the drudgery of writing…[[12]](#footnote-12) There are times when I question my motivation for being a spiritually formative presence in others’ lives. Is it perhaps fueled by manipulativeness or arrogance? Should I seek out that kind of position or simply receive any opportunities that naturally come my way? More fundamentally, I wonder if, as a weak and wounded person myself, I am even qualified to serve in that way… It is also quite difficult for me to take criticism at times, particularly from those who neither know me well nor desire to do so. Even what is meant as objective criticism can seem like a judgment on my abilities, my priorities, my values, my very being.[[13]](#footnote-13) To avoid criticism I overcompensate for my feelings of inadequacy and become a workaholic perfectionist, at least until my heart and actions begin to realign with my truest beliefs and values… And life in community on mission with God is challenging and unpredictable. There are many times when it does not seem worth the price, times when I would like to give up, bow out, and move back to an easier way of life. Though some of these experienced hardships may stem from the incipient nature of my current community, I have no doubts that the challenges will remain well into the future and with any community. Life together is hard—wonderful and well worth the effort, but hard.

*Moving Forward*

Fears, hesitations, and challenges will not rule the day, however, for God is faithful, and it truly seems as that God is leading me down this kind of path for my life. When I juxtapose this dream with the ministerial identity and sense of vocation I have discovered over the years, I see that it fits. The pieces themselves fit, and the vision as a whole fits. I am particularly struck by the fact that the three options I explored in my first reflection on ministerial identity—missions, teaching, and nonprofit work—remain present in my vision for an ideal future, though in nuanced ways to be sure. I closed out my previous reflection unable to understand how I would decide between those three options, committing to prayer and discernment, and wanting to live faithfully as the created image of God in the meantime. What I have discerned in the intervening years through prayer and a better understanding of myself as the image of God is that rather than choosing *between* the three options, I will likely proceed by embracing *all* of them in certain ways.

1. The assessment I refer to here is called “Loving God in Different Ways,” adapted by blogger and minister Kathy Escobar (and others) from Gary Thomas’s book *Sacred Pathways: Discovering Your Soul’s Path to God.* Though I have not yet had the privilege of reading the book, I discovered the assessment on Escobar’s blog (<http://kathyescobar.com/2011/08/26/loving-god-in-lots-of-different-ways/>), and it has proved helpful to me. I have included the questions and descriptions received from Escobar on my portfolio blog for your reference. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See my “Reflection on Ministerial Identity—Justice” update, which is posted on my portfolio blog. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. More information on most of these endeavors can also be found in the artifacts on my portfolio blog, so I will refrain from explaining them further here. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. As people who desire to honor the image of God wherever it is found, the members of the St. Ann Community are committed to taking on some of the many injustices we see around us: gender inequality, racial division, homophobia, unsustainable eating and building practices, and the list goes on. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. These thoughts on my place within the church only begin to hint at my broader ecclesiology. Sadly, there is not nearly enough room in this paper for a fuller treatment of that. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. I cannot recall what motivated my cursory treatment of gender. Veiled frustration, indifference, and hopes that perhaps gender did not really matter are all good candidates. In all reality, the truth is that I probably just did not think to think about it. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. If you have any questions about the validity of this statement, I ask only that you listen carefully and openly to the experiences of women from conservative Christian backgrounds who feel God’s call to ministry. Hear, for instance, the testimony shared in the podcasts “She is Called” and “She is Formed” (available through <http://www.halfthechurch.com/>). Bits of my own story of ministerial discernment and identity struggle are offered in the first. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. That is even leaving aside the potential eternal repercussions—for both myself and those whom I taught—if I were wrong about God’s instructions to women in the church. What a weight to bear! [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. One potential danger here is that my perspective might then be interpreted as *the* feminine perspective, a hasty and faulty assumption to make. One potential advantage, however, is that as one of a small number of women in my field (particularly from own church heritage), my perspective and partnership might be specifically sought out and attended to, perhaps even opening educational and employment doors that might otherwise be closed. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. For further information on these values and what they entail, see the document “My Values,” which is posted on my portfolio blog. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. This career path would, of course, necessitate certain steps forward in the near future, most notably PhD work to prepare me for teaching. As I pursue this future or something much like it, then, I must also begin to explore options for further education. A degree in practical theology, perhaps with a focus on missiology or intentional communities, seems appropriate—and alluring! [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. I do not always find writing tedious, thankfully. I actually like to think of myself as a relatively competent wordsmith and communicator, and I often enjoy writing, at least when it is about matters I find especially interesting. Somehow the *obligation* to write, however, makes writing feel like… well, an obligation. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. This response is deeply rooted in persistent fears of failure and of not being loved well. For many years, my heart believed that to be loved—more than that, to be lovable and valuable—required being pretty darn near perfect. That is a hard lesson to unlearn. It will require a lifelong crusade to do so. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)