EDUCATED AND FORMED:

A Semester of Formational Education with

Missional Life and the Justice and Urban Studies Team

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Field Education

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The intention of my field education experience, carried out throughout the fall semester of 2012, was to learn more about my own vocation as a spiritually formative educator and the university environment in which I foresee that vocation at least partly being enacted.[[1]](#footnote-1) In contrast to the typical field education experience with its emphasis on one context, I proposed to engage in two different formational programs and see what such a comparison revealed about the aims and methods of those programs, as well as about my own potential future role in such an arena.

My goal in this paper is to describe and reflect on that semester-long engagement and to summarize what I have learned from it—both about the programs and about myself. To guide my thoughts, I will use the framework of Richard Osmer’s *Practical Theology: An Introduction*. As I delineate my field education experience here, I will engage in Osmer’s four theological tasks: the descriptive-empirical task, the interpretive task, the normative task, and the pragmatic task.[[2]](#footnote-2) Osmer also uses the following questions (in respective order) to describe these four explorations: What is going on? Why is this going on? What ought to be going on? How might we respond? I will attempt to consider all of these questions, albeit too briefly, as each task must unfortunately be somewhat curtailed if my reflections are to meet the page limitations of this paper.

**What Is Going On?**

The initial task I encounter is the descriptive-empirical. The descriptive-empirical task is immense, so in my attempt to answer the question, “What is going on?” I lay out here a reasonably detailed and rather lengthy portrayal of the two educational contexts.[[3]](#footnote-3) In addition, I also describe my own planned and actual involvement in those contexts.[[4]](#footnote-4)

The first context, the Missional Life (ML) program, began in the spring of 2011. Having seen a need for a spiritually formative program that would help ACU meet its goal of training undergraduate students missionally, Dr. Kent Smith recruited me and five other graduate theology students to discuss solutions. Out of those conversations emerged Missional Life, which sought to draw missionally minded undergraduates into formative relationships and thereby nurture people and communities of faith and mission.

The aims of ML are evidenced in the program’s stated competencies, assets perceived by the development team as essential for a missionally focused life in the Kingdom. Put succinctly, those are God-centeredness, self-knowledge, replication, ears to hear, Kingdom focus, stewardship, friendship, and advocacy.[[5]](#footnote-5) As ML’s methods for working toward those aims revolve largely around relationships, participants are encouraged and expected to share in a variety of deep and deepening relationships. They are to spend time alone with God on a daily basis. They are to develop a relationship with one close, trusted other and meet together with that “soul friend” on at least a weekly basis. And they are to spend time with their cohort (their small ML faith community comprised of four to ten undergrads led by a team of two graduate coaches) on a weekly basis.

Furthermore, they are to participate in monthly training/retreat gatherings of all the ML cohorts. Such gatherings are designed to help students creatively engage life in the Kingdom as part of a diverse community.[[6]](#footnote-6) In addition to this, they will spend monthly time in a coaching relationship with one of their cohort leaders.[[7]](#footnote-7) And finally, students are to develop personalized practices that reflect their engagement in the Kingdom and their good stewardship and sacrificial giving within the Kingdom.

Having set forth these competencies and delivery systems for missional formation among undergrads, Missional Life carried out its pilot year with three cohorts in 2011-2012. ML is set to begin its second iteration in the spring of 2013, with some modifications based on the pilot experience. Changes to the program’s structure include a year and a half long training period beginning with second-semester freshmen (rather than a year long period beginning with sophomores), as well as the addition of a course component meant to deepen students’ formation in an explicitly academic setting.

My own engagement in Missional Life has been varied throughout the process. Missional Life is organized using dynamic governance, or sociocracy, with different circles of responsibility, and from the beginning of ML, I have been part of the general circle of ML leaders and visionaries.[[8]](#footnote-8) During the pilot year, I also served as a co-leader for a small cohort. The cohort struggled, however, and was completely defunct by its second semester. Beginning in the summer of 2012, I began serving in the education circle, a subgroup dedicated to shaping and enacting the educational/training aims of ML.

For the purposes of my field education experience, my chosen participation in ML was essentially to continue what I had already been doing, with somewhat deeper attentiveness to the formational goals and practices of the program. I committed to spending approximately two hours per week participating in the program’s further formation, with particular attention given to the development (in partnership with Benjamin Covington) of the ML-linked course that I am slated to teach in the fall of 2013.

The other context for my engagement, the Justice and Urban Studies Team (JUST program), was launched in the fall of 2012, just as my field education involvement in it began. Over a number of years prior to that point, a relationship between ACU and CitySquare—a faith-based community development organization in Dallas—had been growing. Sensing a need for innovative educational practices to prevent the university experience from becoming outmoded, Dr. Stephen Johnson saw in this partnership the opportunity for a quality contextual immersion experience for his students in the Honors College. With those things in mind, he envisioned and established an interdisciplinary studies degree program—JUST—in which CitySquare, with its aims, its surrounding neighborhoods, and its established partnerships, became students’ key educational context.

The aims of the JUST program have been summarized thus: to offer “a new way of learning that not only requires critical thinking from multiple perspectives, but forms students who will offer themselves—the gift of their intellect, skill, motivated abilities and passions—for the sake of God’s world, particularly in its most vulnerable places.”[[9]](#footnote-9) JUST seeks to form students “who understand clearly their vocation in participation with the mission of God in the world.”[[10]](#footnote-10) The JUST program attends to these aims in one specific context: justice and urban poverty as it can be engaged in Dallas through a partnership with CitySquare.

In order to orient students’ learning most constructively around this emphasis, the JUST program restructures students’ college experience. Instead of pursuing the typical singly focused college degree, JUST students are to combine their individual and varied degrees with an emphasis on sociology (through a second major or a minor), and some of the classes they take are specifically oriented for their sake around the issues of justice and urban poverty. Rather than merely completing a short internship at some point during their college experience (a path that while conceivable for most ACU students is not required), JUST students are to undertake a considerable portion of their degree while embedded in the context of urban poverty. During the first year of their program, they participate in multiple excursions to Dallas; the second year is carried out while in residence near CitySquare’s main campus in Dallas, with short trips back to Abilene for certain coursework. All along the way, students are challenged to think in cross-disciplinary ways about the diverse issues their immersion experience raises, and as they do so, they are introduced to and interact with expert practitioners in a wide range of fields related to justice and urban poverty. This entire experience is purposefully structured as a three-year degree as a means of accommodating the typical JUST student’s desire to finish school quickly in order to engage “real-world” environments and problems sooner. Furthermore, given the highly concentrated and contextual nature of their degree, JUST students will leave ACU with an impressive résumé and a striking array of experiences and skills to aid in their future pursuits.

My own introduction to JUST came in the summer of 2012, when Dr. Johnson asked me to serve as teaching assistant for the program’s fifteen pilot students, who would be embedded in Mike Cope’s freshman Bible class, for which I was lead TA. Recognizing an exciting opportunity to participate in and learn more about this innovative educational program, I readily consented. And Dr. Johnson graciously agreed to allow me to use my engagement in JUST as one context for my own graduate field education requirement. My proposed plan had two parts. First, I would serve as the students’ TA for approximately three hours per week (including teaching them directly on Fridays), connecting with them in the classroom setting and discussing their JUST experience as it related to their coursework. Second, as I was able I would join the JUST team on their excursions to Dallas throughout the semester, participating in and observing their experiences, as well as contemplating any implications those observations might have for my current studies and engagements or for my future vocational plans.

My plans for participating in these two contexts worked out rather well, especially considering the overall challenging nature of that semester for me personally.[[11]](#footnote-11) As anticipated, I was able to continue in Missional Life’s general circle with its biweekly meetings, in which we discussed the ways ML was evolving for our upcoming second year (new cohorts, new structures, new coaches, etc.). In addition to that, as Benjamin and I were asked to provide a rough syllabus and plan for the ML course to Chris Flanders by mid-January, we spent a number of hours, particularly toward the end of the semester and over Christmas break, developing that course to fit with ML’s overall aims and trajectory.[[12]](#footnote-12)

My involvement in JUST also went according to plan, at least for the most part. I was able to spend a fair amount of time interacting with students in the context of Mike’s class, talking with them about the class and JUST as well as about their college and life experiences in general. But as lead TA for the class, I was often busy with other tasks that demanded my time and consideration, so at times I felt like I gave my own students less attention than I would have liked, and less than they deserved.[[13]](#footnote-13) And my engagement with students in the classroom context was not as focused on their experiences in JUST as I had hoped might be the case. I was able to directly teach the students on only four Fridays total.[[14]](#footnote-14) Sadly, attempting to incorporate all the pertinent course-related information and conversation into those four days left little time for discussions of how their classroom learning interacted with their JUST experiences.

I was, however, successful in accompanying the JUST team on two of their excursions to Dallas.[[15]](#footnote-15) For the course of these two days, I immersed myself in the JUST environment, observing (and participating to some degree) in the students’ activities within that context.[[16]](#footnote-16) During that time I learned a great deal about the aims and methods of JUST (as described above), as well as about the students themselves: their personalities, experiences, plans, and passions. The trips to Dallas with the JUST program were an ideal (if somewhat limited) immersion context for me to observe and evaluate the JUST program.

**Why Is This Going On?**

Though it has already received brief attention in tandem with the descriptive-empirical task above, I would now like to consider the interpretive task a bit more thoroughly and explicitly.[[17]](#footnote-17) In the account of their development and inauguration, we have seen to some extent why the Missional Life and JUST programs exist in the first place, but it remains to be explored why they adopt the specific aims and methods they do as they pursue the goal of formational education.[[18]](#footnote-18)

In both its literature and its structure, the Missional Life program reflects a great deal of its originators’ theology.[[19]](#footnote-19) It is based upon a specific understanding of revelation, attention, and participation as they pertain to God and humanity. ML asserts that the context in which ACU finds its students is one of “flawed understandings of God and God’s relationship to the world and history [combined with] epidemic distraction competing for attention and all resources [and a] lack of meaningful practices embraced by individuals and communities.”[[20]](#footnote-20) The aims of ML—God-centeredness, self-knowledge, replication, ears to hear, Kingdom focus, stewardship, friendship, and advocacy—are seen as corrective measures to address these specific challenges of revelation, attention, and participation. When imparted successfully, these aims are seen as establishing a Christian’s missional life on a solid foundation. They lead to a reversal of the former circumstances: “articulated and deepening understanding of God and God’s relationship to the world and history… growing capacity and consistency in discerning the life and work of God in self, others and the world…[and] increasing vocational alignment as evidenced by the investment of resources—time, money and talent.”[[21]](#footnote-21)

As noted previously, the methods ML embraces for effecting these aims are linked to specific relationships deemed essential to genuinely healthy life within God’s Kingdom. God-centeredness is the initial and guiding aim of ML, the aim that all other aims point to and serve. A person’s relationship with God is of fundamental importance. When this conviction is combined with the specific concept of God’s direct revelation that ML espouses, the expected and actual result is that time spent alone with God, listening for God’s direct revelation, is the most emphasized and most regular of the ML practices.[[22]](#footnote-22)

In addition to also reflecting God-centeredness, the other essential ML relationships and practices (soul friend, cohort, and coach) are driven primarily by further ML aims: friendship, advocacy, ears to hear, and even self-knowledge. These relationships are designed to foster the above competencies through humility, deep listening, vulnerability, and submission to God and one another. ML emphasizes these relationships—essentially church kinds of relationships—because of its conviction that community (and all that comes along with community, for example, discernment) is at the heart of God’s vision for the Kingdom.

And the training that ML students undergo through the educational opportunities of ML (retreats, large group gatherings, the ML course) also attends to the ML competencies. Training offers students deeper theological and personal insight (God-centeredness and self-knowledge). It displays models of good practice in the Kingdom (Kingdom service and stewardship) and challenges students to wisely engage in good stewardship of their own resources (Kingdom service, stewardship, and replication, as shaped by their own abilities, opportunities, property, etc.).[[23]](#footnote-23)

Finally, the ML team has embraced sociocracy as a governing system for its activities because we feel that—particularly when times of prayer and discernment are incorporated into the process—this form of governance assists us in honoring God and the image of God as it is found in each participant. Through sociocracy, team members are encouraged to use their talents effectively, to listen well to one another, and to speak honestly to one another. When the sociocratic process is followed, no one’s voice goes unheard, and the dynamic nature of community and revelation are highlighted in positive ways. Sociocracy, therefore, fits with all the ML aims.

Similarly, the chosen methods of the Justice and Urban Studies Team reflect the aims of that program. If the aims of the JUST program are broken down, the following key phrases emerge: “new way of learning,” “critical thinking from multiple perspectives,” “forms students who will offer themselves… particularly in… vulnerable places.” Each of these aims is addressed in certain ways.

First, by completely restructuring students’ degrees and offering a unique educational experience, the JUST program truly is offering a new way of learning. Most importantly, JUST is offering a “whole person experience” that integrates students’ education with practical application. This kind of experience is indispensable for a program that hopes to flourish—or even survive—in the changing educational system of our world, a world in which mere information is easy to acquire.[[24]](#footnote-24) Furthermore, JUST students and professors alike are experimenting with ways in which technology can be imaginatively integrated into that experience. Students were all furnished with an iPad, which they frequently used for the program. And Dr. Johnson even designed an interactive iPad-compatible syllabus for the Core class he taught the team.

Next, JUST’s existence as an interdisciplinary degree serves the aim of multi-perspectival critical thinking. Every student is expected to consider how the combination of his or her unique degree with a sociology degree offers something of insight for the problem of urban poverty. Each student, then, has multiple perspectives. And when those many multi-perspectival people are brought together into one program, an even greater layer of perspective is added. The diversity of the students within the program, then, adds to JUST’s strength and ability to accomplish its aims.[[25]](#footnote-25)

Furthermore, JUST students are regularly exposed to practitioners who are experts on a broad scope of topics related to urban poverty and CitySquare’s goals of community development. The four excursions to Dallas in the fall semester, for instance, were focused on issues as wide-ranging as hope, housing, hunger, and health. On just the two trips for which I was able to accompany them, JUST students met doctors and nurses, community organizers, CitySquare executives, a journalist, pastors, architects, non-profit leaders and team members, a scientist, and a variety of South Dallas residents who are experts on their neighborhood. Introducing students to these kinds of people is another way that JUST is fulfilling its hope of multi-perspectival learning.

Finally, the JUST program is also designed with the aim of student formation in mind. Students are to be formed to offer themselves; the program’s mission statement and choice of practices both make that evident. And it appears that students are being encouraged by their experiences in JUST to more actively participate in God’s work in vulnerable places, if simply by being given opportunities for networking and that kind of engagement as part of their educational experience. In addition, they are challenged to explore ways in which their own desires and talents can contribute to alleviating urban poverty. What remains unclear to me at this point, though, is what additional methods the JUST program is using to form students. I do not want to deny the importance and effectiveness of exposure to a variety of creative people and ideas alongside an ever-present challenge to consider how one’s own abilities and aspirations might intersect with the issue of urban poverty. I can, however, call to mind a few methods that might further the formation of JUST students into people who are effectively able to offer themselves. Such an observation verges on the normative task, though, so it is appropriate that I now turn to that task.

**What Ought To Be Going On?**

On the whole, both Missional Life and the JUST program seem to be extremely well thought out and implemented. Their methods correlate to their aims, and those aims are based upon observed needs and solid theology. Each program responds creatively to the context at hand and exhibits a great aptitude to offer its participants something of substance and value. It seems obvious, then, that the programs’ developers have already deeply considered the question now at hand: What ought to be going on?

Nevertheless, rather than spend my time here simply lauding ML and JUST for doing what they are doing right—much as such praise is deserved—I would like to consider the programs’ limitations, for both ML and JUST do display limitations when it comes to accomplishing their aims. To be perfectly clear, I do not wish to be perceived as offering a negative overall appraisal of either program. That is certainly not my intent. And it is unquestionable that my own perspective on each program is limited. But as a result of even that partial knowledge of the programs’ development and implementation, and particularly as a result of the juxtaposition of the two contexts in my field education experience, a few insights and questions have emerged concerning the programs’ current and potential future effectiveness. These reflections are part of Osmer’s normative task.[[26]](#footnote-26)

One central element the Missional Life team ought to consider more thoroughly is ML’s theology. I am not arguing here that the theology the program espouses is faulty, at least not any more so than all attempts at theology must be called faulty. The theology that ML adopts is, however, quite particular and rather uncommon for its context. While these traits might, in fact, be great strengths, such particular and uncommon theology could become a point of confusion or even contention, especially when dealing with diverse people, with some relatively untrained and some highly trained as theologians. If ML’s theology is to serve as an effective foundation, then, it must be carefully considered and clearly communicated. That being said, the ML program’s theology is extremely well thought out; it does not, however, reflect the theological commitments and assumptions of all of the program’s participants, or even of all the program’s leadership. ML leadership ought to consider, then, either discerning more closely agreed-upon theology or recognizing more clearly the theological leeway or maneuvering room that is available and acceptable. Furthermore, communicating such sophisticated theology in a comprehensible way to a diverse group of theologically untrained undergraduates poses an intimidating challenge. The ML team should intently evaluate, therefore, both what level of theological sophistication its participating students are prepared to handle and how such theology can be communicated most successfully.

And when it comes to recruiting those very students who are participating in the program, ML’s practices leave some to be desired. To be sure, the program is only just entering its second iteration and is undergoing a great deal of refining. The entire ML experience, though, hangs on the presence of quality, committed students in the program, and ML has yet to discern its best practices (or even, I would argue—in the terms of sociocracy—“good enough for now” practices) for recruiting those quality, committed students. The members of the ML leadership team are busy people, and the currently expanding nature of the program itself, with the addition of the course component and new coaches recently, ensures they stay that way. Because their attention is all being directed elsewhere, the general circle seems, for now, to have settled for the practices it currently has in place for recruiting, practices that seem mediocre at best. More robust recruiting methods and expectations need to be set in place, especially before the third year of the program begins.

Furthermore (and for similar reasons), little concentrated attention has been given to the students who completed the program’s pilot year, and to my knowledge no moves have been made to guide them through the proposed second and third years of the ML experience. The fact that three pilot students have chosen to return as coaches for the upcoming year’s cohorts could be framed as an exception to that observation, but even if that perception is accurate, it is clear that at best only an extremely unclear implementation of the later stages planned for ML is in place. Quite simply, this ought not be the case.

The JUST program has its own particular set of limitations. Perhaps most importantly, students were given little opportunity or challenge—at least from what I was able to observe in my time with them—to consider vocation in ways that run deeper than a superficial assessment of how their abilities and degree/career aspirations line up with the specific issue of urban poverty.[[27]](#footnote-27) To my knowledge, no structures for deeper discernment of one’s gifts, passions, opportunities, or calling are in place. JUST leadership ought to consider more fully, then, ways in which they could expand the program’s attentiveness to and guidance of students’ vocations. Moreover, it seems unlikely to me (given what I have observed of JUST) that any discernment about vocation that might have already been undertaken as part of the program would have had much confidence in the concept of God’s direct self-revelation.[[28]](#footnote-28) As a strong believer in such communication, I would also counsel, then, that greater credence and attention be given to the possibility of God’s direct, personal revelation within the vocational discernment process.

Furthermore, and also quite significantly, in my time with the JUST team I have discerned no explicit connection between the JUST experience and the church. Though such a connection is important and could feasibly happen in a number of healthy ways, I am currently aware of no link between JUST and a faith community designed to support students during their immersion experience in Dallas. Though the JUST team are doing many things together that the church should do, they are not doing them *as* the church. Nor are they associated with any particular faith community at CitySquare or in Dallas that might serve as their nurturing congregation and place of communal spiritual encounter. In my estimation, this is a significant weakness to the program. Not only does it betray a weak ecclesiology, but it could also seriously curtail students’ health, success, and theological growth.

Finally, though I commend the proactively engaged nature of the JUST program and its participants, I wonder if the program’s emphases (and lack thereof on certain things) might betray a mindset of mission as *doing* something rather than mission as *being* something. Without further investigation I cannot be sure that this is the case, but such a mindset is not uncommon in our modern American context. And though doing things is certainly an important part of the Christian faith lived well, action ought to flow naturally out of being a certain kind of person first. If it is not already doing so, then, JUST ought to give deep attention to cultivating in students the godly character and Godward submission that are necessary for being the kind of person whose actions also reflect God’s mission.

Setbacks, snags, and insufficiencies are certainly to be expected in the initial years of any program, but if Missional Life and JUST are to grow in effectiveness for the sake of their students, these important limitations must be considered by the programs’ leadership teams. This leads us to Osmer’s fourth and final task, the pragmatic task, which I will now engage with these normative observations in mind.

**How Might We Respond?**

It is within the confines of the pragmatic task that I here make certain concrete prescriptions for addressing the limitations outlined above. I humbly suggest that these ideas, though certainly neither flawless nor exhaustive, fit well with the established aims of the programs and seem sound enough to serve as possible ways forward as the ML and JUST teams contemplate how to address their weaknesses.[[29]](#footnote-29) ML and JUST leadership should certainly feel free to accept, reject, or modify these prescriptions as they deem it fitting and wise to do so.

As the Missional Life program is content in its use of sociocracy to govern its internal workings, the sociocratic process will be central—as well as rather useful—for any changes ML makes to its methods. Thus ML’s general circle should set aside time in its meetings to consider the “ball of yarn” surrounding responses to the problems named above.[[30]](#footnote-30) Since they are already rather busy with tasks surrounding ML’s upcoming second iteration, it is naïve to think that the general circle could address all of those shortcomings in the immediate future. The circle should, however, form and implement proposals concerning those issues within the next nine months, as preparation for the program’s third iteration. And though ML’s use of sociocracy inherently means that any further, more detailed prescriptions that I make here will merely be considered “strands of yarn” in the proposal-shaping process, for what it is worth, I offer the following recommendations.[[31]](#footnote-31)

In order to understand better the theological diversity among its leadership, ML ought to establish a time (likely during the summer, given the busyness of the semesters) when the official theology of ML is explicitly stated and openly discussed. Such a conversation ought to be framed as a valued opportunity to engage in deep theological discussion and even to improve the theological commitments and associated aims and methods of the ML program as a whole. In order to serve these purposes, the conversation must be permeated with love and humility, with all participants welcoming the challenge of dissimilar perspectives.[[32]](#footnote-32)

This sort of discussion also indirectly address the issue of communicating ML’s theology to undergraduate students clearly and accessibly, for the more familiar the ML team are with the program’s endorsed theology, the more skillfully they can articulate it. As further measures to improve communication, however, the ML team ought to also consider using a test audience and implementing specific feedback mechanisms. Both of these approaches could be incorporated into this upcoming year’s experiences, with this year’s students serving as the test audience that informs adaptations for long-term effectiveness. When ML leaders are better informed about exactly how their theology is received, they can make the precise changes necessary to overcome communication barriers.

Leaders of the JUST team face challenges of similar theological scope. Dealing adequately with the limitations to vocational discernment that are present in the JUST program requires attention to methods of vocational discernment. Here such tools as evaluative assessments, guided reflection on past and present experience, coaching, and communal discernment could be helpful and ought to be used. This is not just a matter of a technical fix, however, where certain measures are implemented and the problem is solved. JUST’s leaders will also have to weighing in theologically on the possibility of God’s direct self-revelation (through prayer, dreams, visions, etc.), considering the validity of such an occurrence and altering the practices of the program as their conclusions necessitate.

And the question of JUST students’ connection to the church is an ecclesiological inquiry that ought to be given significant attention. The program’s leadership should contemplate what vision(s) of the church they perceive as theologically sound. In addition to making their insights readily available to JUST students, they should also offer students the opportunity to explore and discuss various healthy and helpful expressions of church while they are in their Dallas context. One viable solution to address the lack of a JUST-church relationship is to connect students to a particular congregation in the South Dallas area, ideally one that is already engaging issues of justice and urban poverty. This church could be designated as a host congregation for the duration of the students’ residency and would actively offer them the kind of spiritual guidance and grounding that all of us need. Alternatively, JUST could simply acknowledge the church-like relationships that already exist among the students and guide them in what it means to be church together as a team. Though this approach would be less familiar to students and would therefore require more explanation and training, the relational and spiritual yields have the potential to be extraordinary, greatly enriching students’ experience of life together with one another as part of God’s missional church.[[33]](#footnote-33) JUST leaders ought to seriously consider this option.

Finally, as the leaders of the JUST program reflect on how to cultivate a certain kind of being in their students (and not merely a certain way of doing things), I would suggest they give attention to the specific virtues that should characterize the kind of student who completes the JUST program, perhaps with reference to commonly recognized Christian virtues. In addition, counterintuitive as it might seem, participation in certain spiritual disciplines can acquaint students with a healthy understanding of the balance between being and doing. Sabbath, worship, contemplation, rest, slowing, confession, secrecy, silence, meditation, solitude, centering prayer, and contemplative prayer would all be good options to explore.[[34]](#footnote-34) At the very least, JUST ought to build into its program specific times and methods for reflection, processing, and spiritual reorienting—at both personal and communal levels—especially during the students’ immersion year in Dallas.

**Educated and Formed**

Though the prescriptions I have offered here are plainly limited, I must move on from the last of Osmer’s theological tasks to reflect briefly (as I have already surpassed my allotted space) on the whole of my field education experience. Over the course of my semester-long engagement in ML and JUST, I learned a number of things, both about formational education and about my own role within such a setting.

The juxtaposition of the two different contexts heightened my attentiveness to and awareness of good practice for academic and spiritual formation in an educational-experiential university context. As I was contemplating program and course development in Missional Life, I was also observing JUST, clearly a well thought out endeavor that had much to teach me about pedagogically engaging students’ imaginations regarding mission in the Kingdom. As I was witnessing students’ experiences in JUST, I was doing so from a position of great familiarity with and affinity for the relational and missional aims of ML, and I was therefore able to pick up on certain strengths of ML that conceivably need more emphasis in JUST for the sake of students’ spiritual health and development. By perceiving both similarities and vast differences between two programs dedicated to formational education in a Christian environment, I came to understand more vividly the importance of clearly defined aims and practices related closely to those aims.[[35]](#footnote-35) Though room for improvement exists in both ML and JUST—and probably always will, given the dynamic nature of education and relationships—both programs exemplify good practice, and I have learned a great deal from them, both independently and in comparison.

More than that, though, I have been formed by them. My involvement in ML and JUST this semester only encouraged my interest in and excitement about continuing to participate in such contexts. I find myself energized by the astounding Kingdom vision that is expressed by both programs. I am encouraged and invigorated by the enthusiasm and dedication of the participants, both students and leaders alike. I am challenged to both grow in technical competence and to think and act in ways that are consistent with the gospel and with godly character. And I find myself affirmed in my own talents and put at ease about my own shortcomings, which are covered by my colleagues’ talent and by God’s grace. To sum up, I find myself having been both educated and formed by my semester of immersion in ML and JUST, educated and formed both *by* and *for* formational education. And I find myself very eager to continue down that path, with greater confidence than ever that formational education is at least part of my God-given vocation.

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1. This is not the sum total of my vocation, to be sure, but I am firmly coming to believe that it is a significant aspect of it. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See Richard R. Osmer, *Practical Theology: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. As I explore the “what” of the situation here, I also at times delve into the interpretive task and its own associated question, “Why is this going on?” Further and more detailed attention will be given to interpretation later, but some of these explanatory notes—particularly on the initial creation of the JUST and Missional Life programs—seem necessary now for a full enough understanding of the contexts. They are truly descriptive-empirical here in that they are accounts of the programs’ stated reasons for existing. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. My own methods of engaging the descriptive-empirical task fall closest to the category of semiformal attending that Osmer outlines. During the course of my field education experience, I engaged in reflection during scheduled meetings with my site mentor (Dr. Smith) and during conversations with my husband. I also made field notes on my experiences; those have submitted alongside this paper. For more on semiformal attending, see Osmer, 38. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. For more detailed information on the competencies (aims) and delivery systems (methods) of Missional Life (ML), as well as on the development and anticipated future of the program, see the “Missional Life Proposal” (in three parts), particularly pages 8-9. The “Missional Life Brochure” also reflects some of these things. Both artifacts have been submitted alongside this paper. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Some gatherings engage aspects of missional Kingdom life that may be unfamiliar—missional gardening or small business, for example. Other gatherings focus more on life on mission *together* in the Kingdom, teaching the extremely diverse students of ML concepts and skills related to communal living. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Though it is not identical, coaching holds similarities to spiritual direction. For more information on coaching as it is practiced in Missional Life, see “DRAWN Coaching,” a guide put together by Dr. Smith. It has been submitted along with this paper. To clarify, the steps should be followed in the DRWN order. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Dynamic governance can be explored more in John Buck and Sharon Villines, *We the People: Consenting to a Deeper Democracy* (Washington, D.C.: Sociocracy.Info, 2007). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Stephen Johnson, “Introducing JUST,” ACU at City Square, entry posted September 5, 2012, <http://blogs.acu.edu/citysquare/2012/09/05/introducing-just/> (accessed January 15, 2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. During the fall semester of 2012, I not only participated in ML and JUST in the ways described here, but I also took 12 graduate hours (and, with the exception of this course, for which I took an Incomplete, made all A’s), taught in and served as lead TA for Mike Cope’s class (of 270 students and 9 other TAs), interacted with my intentional community around some particularly stressful issues, participated in a newly developing house church, traveled quite a bit due to wedding showers and my grandmother’s death, moved myself and my fiancé into a house we’d just purchased and were working on, planned a wedding (and dealt with the endless family-related and decision-making stresses that that entailed), got married, and—praise God!—went on a week-long honeymoon. It was a semester like none other. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. As it should be considered an artifact of my time investments for field education, a working draft of that syllabus has been submitted alongside this paper. It will undergo further revision between now and when the course is taught in the fall of 2013, but we anticipate that the ideas will remain basically the same. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. It seems this is the very reason why some lead TAs choose not to teach a section of students in addition to performing their other duties. At times it was quite the challenge to do both effectively. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. The students spent four of the thirteen available Fridays on excursions in Dallas. On one other Friday, I had to be absent for family reasons. One Friday was dedicated to an exam, and three others to group presentations. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. I had hoped and planned to join them on a third trip as well, but some miscommunication between myself and Dr. Johnson surrounded that trip, and I was therefore unable to attend. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. The field notes I recorded for October 12th, November 30th, and January 10th all discuss in detail my experiences on these excursions. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. As before with the descriptive-empirical task, my interpretive methods here are not the most rigorous ones available on Osmer’s continuum. They fall somewhere on the spectrum between thoughtfulness and wise judgment, leaving aside most theoretical interpretation. See Osmer, 82-6 for more detail on these distinctions. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. It seems to me that the interpretive task is accompanied quite closely by another that Osmer does not as directly address: the evaluative task. Not to be confused with the very similar normative task, which specifies what aims and methods *should* be in place, the evaluative task explores whether or not the methods of a person or an organization effectively meet the aims that *are* in place. My thoughts in this section and the next, then, may at times be evaluative as well as simply interpretive. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Further details on much of the following can be found in the “Missional Life Proposal,” specifically on pages 5-8. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Ibid., 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. The same beliefs are also evidenced in the coaching process, where attention to God’s revelation is essential. It should also be noted that while ML recognizes that, due to the wide variety of human personalities and traits that exist, time with God can be practiced in a plethora of ways, the primary goal of time with God that ML promotes is attention for the sake of receiving revelation that can be responded to. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. When offered the opportunity to teach an ML-linked course, the general circle considered the positive and negative implications of such a prospect and determined that a significantly larger amount of time to engage with students on ML topics would strengthen the program’s effectiveness at achieving its aims. Given its specifically academic setting, the ML course will not attempt to address all the ML competencies, but it will give sustained attention to a number of them. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. The JUST experience (or a comparable experience) helps the university maintain relevance and influence in a world that is rapidly changing due to technology. For more on this, see my January 10th field note entry and my notes on a conversation with Bill Rankin, which have been submitted alongside this paper. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. The same can be said for Missional Life, though I have chosen not to focus on that aspect of ML, as it does not directly relate to an exploration of ML’s aims and methods. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. This time my own approach falls somewhere on the more formal end of Osmer’s continuum, somewhere between discernment and theological/ethical interpretation. For more on these approaches to the normative task, see Osmer, 137ff. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. To be sure, the JUST team is explicitly focused on *justice* and *urban* studies, but I can hardly imagine that all its students’ vocations (if given proper attention) would lead them to the particular milieu of urban *poverty*. Nevertheless, all students’ three-year-long efforts are directed toward that one specific aspect of justice in an urban environment. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Here I am thinking specifically of the kind of direct divine self-revelation that is at the heart of Missional Life’s theology and practices. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. My prescriptions fall in a variety of places within Osmer’s categories of task competence, transactional leadership, and transforming leadership. For more on the distinction between the three, see Osmer, 176-8. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. “Ball of yarn” is a phrase used in sociocracy to describe the many and varied components of a possible response to any given issue. When forming a proposal, circle members suggest “strands” that could be part of a solution, and these strands are later incorporated as necessary/helpful into a specific proposal. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. The limitations regarding recruiting new students and attending to those who have completed the initial year of the ML program seem relatively easy to address in rather straightforward ways. That being the case, because I have limited space here, I have chosen not to offer further prescriptions for those issues, concentrating instead on the more abstract issues of theology and communication. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Similar conversations have happened in the past, particularly as ML was just beginning to develop. However, nearly two years of experience and theological development, as well as numerous changes to the leadership team seem substantial enough grounds for yet another conversation about ML’s theology. It might even be prudent to consider a periodically recurring conversation, or at least some official newcomers’ introduction to ML’s theology (complete with the important opportunity to offer constructive challenge). [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. If the JUST leadership were to decide to go this latter direction, they would find helpful resources and (I’m assuming) willing partners in Missional Life. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. These practices and many more are helpfully outlined in Adele Ahlberg Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook: Practices That Transform Us* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2005). I would even suggest supplying a copy of this book to each participant in the JUST program and using it as part of the students’ learning experience. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. I also learned some about my own need to be more proactive in asking good, direct questions about things like aims and practices. Out of Osmer’s four theological tasks, I am (in my own brief evaluation) weakest at the descriptive-empirical, which is, I suppose, something else important that I have discovered. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)