**Ministry Context**

In my three years thus far as a graduate student of theology, I have found within myself one overarching vocational desire: to become someone who, because of her own formation into a virtuous Christian woman, aids in the formation of other virtuous, godly people. This is what I am coming to believe is my true calling in the Kingdom. Though such a calling could be worked out in a myriad of ways, given my passion and capacity for theological education (both in my own life and the lives of others), I foresee it as quite likely that I will live out this vocation in a university setting as a professor and mentor.

This vocation is not merely some far off future, however, for my life already reflects my calling. In addition to being a student myself, for the past two years I have been serving in an instructive capacity as one of Mike Cope’s teaching assistants, educating and ministering to my own group of roughly 30 students each semester. This year, as lead TA, I oversee the other nine TAs and manage the day-to-day logistical gymnastics of running a class of 270 students, all in addition to teaching my own students. The group of students I was specifically asked to teach this year, however, is not the normal collection of students one would expect to find in a required non-honors freshman Bible class. Rather, the fourteen students I am instructing are the pilot participants of the JUST (Justice and Urban Studies) program, under the direction of Dr. Stephen Johnson. To give a very brief synopsis, these fourteen students are participating in a three-year educational experience that integrates their studies as honors students at ACU with a sociological exploration of and engagement with urban poverty, particularly in the context of Dallas, Texas. Their coursework, their study abroad experiences, their mentoring—quite simply, most of their undergraduate experience—will be geared toward this emphasis on justice as it intersects with urban poverty. And as their teaching assistant, I am privileged to participate with them in this journey for a time.

Furthermore, I am also one of six graduate students who has worked attentively with Dr. Kent Smith over the past year and a half to develop another program here at ACU, the Missional Life Initiative (MLI), which just finished its pilot year in May. MLI was designed to draw missionally minded undergraduate students into formative relationships with peers and mentors, educing, in the context of faith community, their God-given abilities for the furtherance of the Kingdom in their lives. Through a focus on practices such as time with God, time with other Christians, spiritual direction, and service, MLI fosters competencies laid out by the development team. These competencies include things like being able to give deep attention to what God is doing in the world and in us, being able to listen effectively and advocate for others with skill, and being able to use one’s own discernable talents to serve and promote the Kingdom. Due to start its second year with students in January, MLI will soon also contain an educational component expressly linked to the university, as one other mentor and I are currently developing an MLI-linked course that we are scheduled to teach in the fall of 2013.

**Problem and Purpose**

Within these two contexts, opportunities abound for observing and participating in formational education. From what I can observe, it seems that students (and mentors!) in these contexts are purposefully being formed into more virtuous Christians. We are learning more fully who God hopes us to be and are becoming evermore ready and willing to engage life as these people. My involvement in these environments, then, already begins to fulfill my own vocation.

However, I know that if I am to become the competent teacher and mentor that I hope to be in the future, there is a great deal more for me to learn and explore. My own pedagogical and formational experience is not nearly as developed as I desire, though it is growing, to be sure. In order to advance further in this arena, I need greater exposure to a variety of methods of teaching and shaping students. JUST and MLI both offer opportunities for me to grow by further participation in teaching and formation. These programs, however, are far from identical, and their differences lend strength to my pursuit of a well-rounded experience. While both programs aim at the formation of undergraduate students into people who embody some kind of Christian virtue, because they focus on different facets of virtue, they have distinct purposes and accomplish those purposes in distinct ways. Participating in both of these contexts, then, offers greater opportunity than participating in either one alone, and not only by multiplication of experiences but also by the exponential growth that can come through juxtaposing those experiences.

It is my hope and belief that through comparing and contrasting the different aims and methods of these programs, I can begin to uncover a bit of the great richness of knowledge and wisdom concerning spiritual formation that I know exists within them. My principal goal in this field education experience is to be able to identify some parallels and divergences in the aims, approaches, and accomplishments of these two programs. I then hope to use this information in the future to understand more clearly and to fulfill more adequately my own vocation as a spiritually formative presence.

**Field Education Proposal**

Over the course of this semester, my involvement in field education will, in short, be as a teacher, a course developer, and a participant-observer. It will look something like the following:

* serving as TA for the fourteen JUST students involved in Mike Cope’s “Life and Teachings of Jesus” class (approximately 3 hours per week, for a total of 48 hours)
* joining the JUST students on some of their excursions to Dallas throughout the semester (4 excursions possible, at approximately 16 hours each; I anticipate attending 2, for a total of 32 hours)
* continued participation in the formation of MLI and the MLI-linked course (approximately 2 hours per week, for a total of 48 hours)
* communication with Dr. Kent Smith and Dr. Stephen Johnsonconcerning this field education experience (approximately 30 minutes per week, for a total of 8 hours)
* documentation of field notes (approximately 30 minutes per week, for a total of 8 hours)
* reading and reflection on Richard Osmer’s *Practical Theology* (approximately 12 hours)
* reflection on the similarities and dissimilarities of MLI and JUST, as well as what those entail for my own future (approximately 30 minutes per week, for a total of 8 hours)
* composition of a 20-page integrative paper (approximately 35 hours)

These activities, if my estimations are accurate, will total 199 hours. Of those hours, 128 will be direct engagement hours with JUST and MLI, and the remaining 71 will be hours spent in reading as well as reflection on and communication about my field education experience.

Within both of these contexts of engagement, I plan to consider the following questions, as well as other questions with similar intent that seem to be relevant:

* What are the aims of this program and the theological justifications for these aims? How do these compare/contrast with the aims of the other program? How do these correlate (or not) with the idea of virtue formation in Christians?
* Do the activities of this context seem (in a general sense) to fulfill the aims of the program? If so, how? If not, why are they included?
* Are any explicit aims of this program being neglected or only partially fulfilled? If so, why might this be the case?
* What is occurring in this context that is not occurring in the other context, and why?
* Are those participating in this program actually being formed into more virtuous Christians? If so, in what ways, and how? If not, why not?
* In what ways is this program limited in its ability to express the Kingdom and/or form virtuous Christians?
* What can I learn by comparing and contrasting the aims and approaches of these two contexts? What common threads emerge concerning spiritual formation? In what ways can each context inform, even improve, the other?
* What can I learn about myself through reflection on these two contexts and my participation in them? What strengths and weaknesses do I see in myself as a spiritually formative person/mentor/teacher? What can I discern about possible ways forward within my vocation?

To be sure, this list is not exhaustive, though not even all of these questions can be explored fully in the course of a semester, nor can all of them be adequately addressed in the course of a 20-page paper. They will provide a starting point, however, to focus my thoughts as I consider what virtue formation can look like in various contexts.

Though my field education will be carried out under the guidance of both Drs. Smith and Johnson (as well as Mike Cope), Dr. Smith will serve as my primary advisor. While my engagement hours with JUST are more numerous than my engagement hours with MLI this semester, in the overall scheme of things thus far, I am working from a place of greater familiarity with and time commitment to MLI. Furthermore, the longstanding relationship I have developed with Dr. Smith through the MRNA (Missionary Residency for North America) internship over the course of the past two years provides a solid foundation for us to be able to communicate clearly about my experiences, as well as perhaps more immediate richness of conversation about the ways that those experiences are shaping my own understandings of spiritual formation in a university context.