REFLECTION ON MINISTERIAL IDENTITY

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Discerning my ministerial identity over the course the past few years has been, as I have noted previously, a process of distillation. I entered the GST with a well-developed aptitude for self-reflection and a poorly developed sense of specific ministerial vocation.[[1]](#footnote-1) I am not leaving the GST in the same condition, however, for that skill of self-reflection has proven to be an indispensible tool, equipping me to interpret three and a half years of diverse academic and ministry experiences and to discover a deeper sense of ministerial identity and vocation along the way. As part of that discovery and the GST’s formational process, I have periodically composed formal reflections on my ministerial identity, each refining the ideas of the last by highlighting and reflecting on personal and vocational trends and themes that emerged.

I wrote my initial draft of this reflection during my first semester in the GST, in the fall of 2009. The paper expressed my motivations for pursuing graduate-level theological education and named three conceivable paths forward in ministry: foreign missions, non-profit work, and teaching. I examined my own experiences and personal design, related internal and external affirmation, and ruminated on numerous questions and doubts. However, at the paper’s conclusion I found myself still unable to articulate a clear understanding of my ministerial calling and my desired future. That being the case, I proposed to wait on God and continue in prayer, discernment, and faithful living.

My second formal reflection was a bit more developed. I wrote it in the spring of 2012, two and a half years after the first. The experiences of the intervening years had helped me comprehend more clearly my own ministerial design and hopes, and I expressed in this revised draft an understanding of myself as an activist, a caregiver, and a healer. I also spent some time reflecting on ecclesiology and gender, two previously neglected topics that are intimately related to my ministerial vocation.[[2]](#footnote-2) And though I was unable to give specific, concrete plans about what my future vocational path would look like, the picture I was able to paint in broad strokes—one depicting a life of healthy balance, community involvement, education, and formation—exhibited a great deal more focus and detail than the previous reflection’s rather primitive portrayal.

This draft, the final iteration required by the GST, has proven the hardest draft to write by far. I began to compose it with lofty aspirations of articulating my ministerial vocation with more precision, depth, and theological sophistication than ever before, for this draft comes at the end of my formal education at ACU and on the heels of an eventful and formative year.[[3]](#footnote-3) Yet a number of things have held me back. Precisely because many of these circumstances have contributed to further clarity regarding my ministerial identity and direction, rendering me capable of speaking in more concrete terms than ever before, they have also intensified my desire to be *living* the life I know I am called to, rather than merely analyzing it in a written reflection on ministerial identity. This disposition is only exacerbated by the moderate burnout on theological education that I am currently experiencing. I find myself torn between my obligations and my aspirations, wanting to neglect the former for the sake of the latter, even though the two often overlap in significant ways.[[4]](#footnote-4) Thus I find that focusing on school (and writing in particular) is terribly difficult at the moment. However, I will press on and offer you what thoughts I can muster, whatever their quality or lack thereof.[[5]](#footnote-5)

**Embodied Evangelism**

As a result of both the academic and personal reflection I have undertaken in the course of my time in the GST, I have come to believe that the vocation of all Christians—individually and corporately—can be summed up thus: embodied evangelism, living as good news among and for the rest of the world. We are first to be permeated by God’s good news—healed of our infirmities, freed from our oppression, inspired to nurture and exhibit the divinely instilled image, and challenged to grow into the likeness of Christ. God’s work in us is thus displayed for all the world to see and marvel at. As a result, then, because we are transformed *by* the good news, we also *become* good news. As we emulate divine characteristics and actions in increasing measure, we incarnate the good news to all creation, all the while pointing back to the One who truly is the best good news.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Living this kind of thoroughly gospeled life is my calling, then, just as it is for all Christians. This is a calling that I have been trying to attend to in ever-deepening ways recently, for I find that I am in many ways in need of more good news in my own life.[[7]](#footnote-7) In order to engage this vocation in a fuller way, then, I have sought (among other things) greater balance, a healthier view of myself and my own giftedness, a renewed sense of joy and peace, and the ability to let go of perfectionism. I have embraced my own sins, limitations, needs, and desires to a greater degree and with greater candor and hope than ever before. And in all this I have falteringly pursued a deeper relationship with God through a variety of avenues, ranging from gardening to fasting to resting to both participation in and withdrawal from Christian communities. Along the way, I have learned a number of things. Most notably, I can see that I still have a great deal of growing to do and that I need greater space for God in my life and in my heart. I can also see that it is only when I am truly being transformed by God’s good news that I am able to be a transformative presence in others’ lives, and I can see that there are specific ways in which this happens most readily.

This brings me to the second major aspect of embodied evangelism: though all Christians pursue the general calling of embodied evangelism, each person has distinct ways of living as good news, ways that reflect individual design and desires. We are, after all, diverse people, created to reflect our infinite and multifaceted God. We are the body of Christ, made up of many different parts, each with a distinct function. And we are all scarred differently by sin and therefore transformed differently by God’s good news. Each of us has a unique perspective on God’s creative intent and God’s restorative power, and each of us witnesses to those things in our own ways. This, then, shapes our secondary vocational calling, whether that is as an artist, a teacher, a business leader, a caregiver, or a minister. Though variety exists based on design, the overall function is always the same: as people permeated by God’s good news, we witness to and embody that good news among and for the rest of the world.

Recognizing that I was gifted and called to the specific ministry of serving the church with undivided emphasis, I chose to pursue graduate theological education and to dedicate myself to discernment regarding the particularities of how this calling should be carried out.[[8]](#footnote-8) I began the discernment process with a broad understanding of ministry and my own vocational path, but the process of distillation has served its refining purpose. As I have engaged in various forms of ministry and spent time in reflection on my ministerial identity over the course of the past three and a half years, I have begun to identify a certain theme that emerges concerning my own witness as good news. At the risk of being repetitive, my calling is just this: embodied evangelism. In addition to pursuing this kind of life-encompassing faith on a personal level, I am learning that my vocation is to encourage and cultivate it in others. I am to serve as a person who lives the gospel, who is safe and welcoming for others, who draws others out and encourages them to employ their gifts, and who challenges them to see the gospel in their lives in a deeper way. My gifting is that of a teacher, a nurturer, and a guide—all towards the aim of living in and as the good news.

**Embodied Evangelism — Learned and Lived**

During the course of my time in the GST, I have been blessed to participate in a variety of opportunities that have resonated with and strengthened this desire for embodied evangelism. Over the past three and a half years I have been involved in the St. Ann Community, MRNA, the Missional Life program, a job as a teaching assistant, and a house church. Each context has served in its own way as a particularly formative investment, allowing me to explore and express something of what it means for me to be a person who embodies the good news and encourages others to do so as well.[[9]](#footnote-9)

In the midst of these involvements, I have learned that my own faith only flourishes when I am a part of deeply invested, deeply vulnerable Christian community, where I myself am nurtured and challenged. As much as the firmly established introvert in me might rebel at times, I know that I need the companionship and counsel of others who are committed to walking by my side as we all pursue God. And though I have experienced the anguish that life in community can bring, I have also experienced the beauty and power of its God-given capacity to transform. I and my faith have been shaped for the better in community, and I know that I cannot exist well apart from it.

In addition to being thus formed in these contexts, I have also been given some opportunities to serve as a formative presence for others, both in formal and informal ways. As a community and house church member, I have offered my Christian brothers and sisters the same kind of nurturing and challenging they have often offered me, using my gifts for empathy, insight, and eloquence for the service of the church. I have verbalized and affirmed community members’ gifts, calling and encouraging them to embrace these gifts as part of their vocation. I have served in similar fashion in my roles as teacher and mentor, though in these situations I have taken on a more official position as guide and instructor. I have encouraged students to think clearly and deeply about vocation at the universal and personal levels. I have tried to help them see more clearly their own involvement in the mission of God by focusing them both on the divine narrative and on their own God-given opportunities to embrace and embody good news. And I have sought to model for them what a life of embodied evangelism can look like.

Yet even as helpful as this general framework of embodied evangelism has been for me, it clearly leaves much room for further specificity regarding what particular shape my own life and ministry will take on. For that reason, I would like to offer here some additional thoughts on how I anticipate embodying evangelism in both the present and the foreseeable future. In addition to a continued pursuit of greater personal permeation by the good news in ways like those described earlier, I cannot help but believe that the ways in which I will embody evangelism in my life include three particular emphases: creation, community, and formation.

Though I will never be able to fully live into the intended relationship between a human being and the rest of creation—I do live in a fallen world, after all—it is my hope that I can order my life in a way that honors the goodness of God that is expressed through the creation. Because I believe that the creation reflects God’s image in amazing ways, I care deeply about the earth and its inhabitants, humans included. Issues like recycling, organic farming, responsible eating, and general environmental sustainability are important for me, then, and I see my support of these causes as one way of embodying evangelism. As I move forward throughout life, my ministry will certainly include calling attention to the importance of honoring God by caring well for God’s creation, both through my own personal choices and in relationships and opportunities of formation.[[10]](#footnote-10)

My engagement in ministry will also undoubtedly include participation in community. Though Christian community is important for my own ministerial flourishing in the ways outlined above, it is also central to the task of witnessing to the good news because it is the diverse manifestation of Christ’s body on earth. It serves as the corporate expression of the good news in ways that no one person can. For these reasons and many more, my ministry will take place from the foundation of Christian community, and it will seek to draw others into that experience so that they can participate in God’s formative work in the community of faith.

Finally, my own work as a witness to God’s good news will entail serving in a formational role for Christian brothers and sisters who are maturing in the faith. This will, of course, necessitate humble openness to the formative work of God and others in my own life, as well as an attentiveness to what God is doing and how God is communicating. From this foundation, I will engage my roles as teacher, nurturer, and guide, helping people draw closer to God and open themselves up to being transformed by God. This may happen in the classroom, through mentoring or spiritual direction, through theologically focused writing, or simply through interpersonal relationships. Wherever it occurs, though, I will pursue my vocation of forming and being formed for embodied evangelism.

**A Vision of Life to Come[[11]](#footnote-11)**

One vision for such a life of embodied evangelism continually presents itself as I continue to engage in the discernment process. It looks at bit like this: I am a member of a healthy, vibrant intentional Christian community that serves as good news to one another and those around us in a number of ways. We are deeply engaged in sharing life together, opening ourselves to God and to forming and being formed by one another.

We live a simple life together, practicing creation care and learning in increasing measure how to exist in healthy relationship with the earth.[[12]](#footnote-12) At the least we garden, recycle, and choose ethical resources and food. Perhaps more, though, we also run a sustainable farm to bring in some income and to serve as a witness to this important aspect of our faith. We see our simple yet vibrant way of life as a testimony to God’s good news.

And we readily welcome others into our life together. Some come as learners, interested in who we are and what we believe. Some come as those who are deeply wounded spiritually; they are seeking the rest, care, freedom, purpose, and companionship that a community like ours offers. Perhaps we have even established some sort of a retreat center for these hurting people, offering a safe space in the world for those who need time and space to discern and heal. Some who visit may choose to become long-term members of this community, but all who visit are refreshed by the good news that they experience among us.

We support the use of our community members’ gifts, and for that reason, my own vocation as a spiritually formative teacher and guide is encouraged. I pursue my God-given talent for and love of learning, deepening my knowledge and wisdom regarding questions of mission, practical theology, community, creation care, and spiritual formation. As I continue to learn, I also teach and write. I may be a faculty member at a nearby university, or our community may serve as some sort of alternative seminary location.[[13]](#footnote-13) I may write journal entries, blog posts, articles, or books. Whatever the medium, I serve to guide others as they seek to understand their own God-given design and desires, on both the individual and communal levels.[[14]](#footnote-14)

Yes, this is a life of embodied evangelism that is attractive and that fits with my calling and gifting. I would gladly engage in this life, and I am eagerly pursuing opportunities and relationships that lead more fully into this life. I am sure, though, that future life experience and reflection will refine my reflections even further, so while I hold forth these dreams and prospects as both realistic and plausible, I also eagerly look forward to God’s continued providential work in my life. Whatever happens and wherever God leads me, though, I look forward to witnessing with my life to the good news of God.

1. Though other factors surely existed as well, I believe my femaleness contributed greatly to this state of affairs. As a woman from a church heritage that generally permits only men to be ministers, for most of my life I was not allowed to dream (at least publicly) of ministry or theology as a vocation. And though this served me constructively by compelling me to examine my general calling to ministry carefully before pursuing it (as I noted in my 2012 draft), it was also detrimental in that I was not offered the supportive community and imaginative freedom—both of which are important for detailed vocational discernment—that most of my male peers had. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Both ecclesiology and gender—and particularly the intersection of the two—contributed to my initial reticence at choosing a ministerial path. Disciplined theological reflection, however, has led me to conclusions on both ecclesiology and gender (as well as on their convergence) that do not so closely resemble the assumptions of my upbringing. As well as influencing my historical and present circumstances, then, my ecclesiology and gender inform my future as a Christian and a minister by demarcating the kinds of faith communities in which I will be free and willing to participate. I could (and will, at some point) say much more on this topic, but this will suffice for now. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. During this past year I have embraced many opportunities, faced many challenges, and dreamed many dreams. Among other things, during this past year I took on the role of lead TA for an immense Bible class, encountered a great deal of conflict and relational stress in community, participated in a newly developing house church, got married, encountered cancer a mere three months into marriage, worked with two undergraduate formational programs, developed an academic course for one of those programs, and spent a lot of time dreaming with my husband about our future life together in the Kingdom. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. This is much as I wrote (regarding the writing task specifically) in my 2012 draft of this paper, “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.” I find this inclination holds true in a number of aspects of my life. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. I should be clear here: the thoughts I offer in this paper are not meant to replace the reflections in my 2012 draft. They are at some level a refinement of those reflections, but I would more precisely term them simply a different lens through which to view those insights. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. My perspective on evangelism here resembles and reflects a great deal of influence by Bryan Stone’s work. He writes, “The most evangelistic thing the church can do today is to be the church—to be formed imaginatively by the Holy Spirit through core practices such as worship, forgiveness, hospitality, and economic sharing into a distinctive people in the world, a new social option, the body of Christ. It is the very shape and character of the church as the Spirit’s ‘new creation’ that is the witness to God’s reign in the world and so both the source and aim of Christian evangelism.” I wholeheartedly agree. See Bryan Stone, *Evangelism After Christendom: The Theology and Practice of Christian Witness* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2006), 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. My ministry engagement plan and evangelism reflection paper from Dr. Kent Smith’s *Evangelism in North America* class outline some of the ways in which I have been trying to do this. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. For more on my understanding of ministry (both at the congregational and catholic levels), see my theology of ministry paper, which was also composed in the spring of 2013. It can be accessed at http://blogs.acu.edu/leb09b/theology-of-ministry/. Furthermore, when I mention the idea of “calling,” I wish to include but not require the experience of receiving revelatory communication directly from God. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Though I am open to further conversation, I will not go into great detail about each context here. And though the insights I offer here are perhaps some of the most important ones that have emerged from my participation in these contexts, they are far from the only ones. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Because of its many strengths and the ways it deeply resonates with me personally, I use the metaphor of minister as gardener in my theology of ministry paper (again, available at http://blogs.acu.edu/leb09b/theology-of-ministry/). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. This section at times borrows word for word from page 11 of my 2012 reflection on ministerial identity, which is available at http://blogs.acu.edu/leb09b/reflections-on-ministerial-identity/ministerial-identity-—-spring-2012/. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. It is a life of nature, of rhythms, of peace and prosperity. It is a life of green grass, budding peach trees, happy puppies, lots of chickens to feed, and a garden full of vegetables to care for and harvest. It is a beautiful life. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. I must admit, the idea of a community-run classroom or alternative seminary really appeals to me. Given the number of people I know who are both interested in community and called to some sort of teaching ministry, it is not out of the question. For either of these options, though, it would be necessary (or at least probably helpful) for me to complete a PhD. Yet choosing a program and an academic focus proves a bit difficult, for there’s not exactly a box to check on PhD applications for “garden-growing, bread-baking, sustainable-food-eating theologically trained thinker, writer, and conversation partner who believes her passionate, balanced, God-inspired life *is* her witness and therefore is her ministry.” Oh, how I wish there were! Until one appears, though, I will continue in discernment about the wisdom of pursuing a PhD.

    One thing I must consider carefully as I discern my future path is whether or not I am interested in working full time as a faculty member of a Christian school. I do have a deep desire to live among people who do not know the gospel, yet teaching opportunities that align with my interests are mostly at Christian schools. I am not sure yet what this means for my own life and career. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. As a long-term member of a healthy intentional community, I can encourage and counsel other communities who are seeking advice as they walk down the paths of formation, discernment, mission, conflict, and celebration that God leads them to. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)