The Role of Theological Reflection in
Education for Ecclesial Ministry

by

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Abstract

Christian tradition offers a framework and a lens through which the world of human behaviour can be seen, understood and evaluated. In Education for Ecclesial Ministry, theological reflection ensures that there is an on-going conversation between the Christian tradition, theology in the academy and theology in ministry; various dimensions of the one enterprise. Theological reflection, in addition, offers a forum whereby implicit theological assumptions and personal biases are brought from the background to the foreground so that they may be identified, examined and critically addressed in pastoral practice.

The role of the theological reflection seminar in the Education for Ecclesial Ministry programme in St Patrick’s College, Maynooth is the focus of this thesis. The literature on theological reflection and formation for ecclesial ministry has been assessed. Action-research examined the role of the theological reflection seminar in helping students to integrate the human, spiritual, academic and pastoral dimensions of the programme and to name their operative theology in ministry. It also aimed to identify how the seminar enabled the participants to form and appropriate a ministerial identity. Using a case study method, the researcher identified the experience of the research participants through data received from a focus group, an individual questionnaire and an interview.

The results of the study strengthened the need for the inclusion of regular, formal and disciplined theological reflection in formation for ministry. Theological
reflection is an invaluable tool in enabling ministry students to integrate the four elements of ministry formation and in developing an operative theology for ministry. The thesis identified a need for further research into the formation and appropriation of a ministerial identity in the Education for Ecclesial Ministry programme. It confirmed a need for further study to identify ways in which theological reflection could be incorporated into the schedule of full-time ecclesial ministers in order to facilitate on-going development of ministerial identity.
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Chapter One

The Context of the Research

Sometimes the mountain / is hidden from me in veils
of cloud, sometimes / I am hidden from the mountain
in veils of inattention, apathy, fatigue, /
when I forget or refuse to go / down to the shore or a few yards
up the road, on a clear day, / to reconfirm / that witnessing presence.¹

1.1 Introduction

Theological reflection is a process of discernment employed to identify where and how
God is present and at work in a person’s life against the backdrop of Scripture, theology,
and church tradition. In ecclesial ministry and in this research, theological reflection is
understood as:

the discipline of exploring individual and corporate experience in
conversation with the wisdom of a religious heritage. The conversation is
a genuine dialogue that seeks to hear from our own beliefs, actions, and
perspectives, as well as those of the tradition. It respects the integrity of
both.²

Being Christian means participating in the mission and ministry of Christ. To be on
mission is about enabling the world to reveal God’s love. To trust that God’s word is
working through each person, it is necessary to become aware, both in speaking and
listening, of what is happening in and around us. Theological reflection, especially when
it takes place in a group context, facilitates God’s mission. The aim of this study is to
research the process of reflection as experienced in a theological reflection seminar

² Patricia O’Connell Killen and John de Beer, The Art of Theological Reflection (New York: Crossroad, 1995), viii.
within the context of the Education for Ecclesial Ministry programme in the Pontifical University, St Patrick’s College, Maynooth, Ireland.

1.2 The Theological Reflection Seminar

The facilitated theological reflection seminar of four to six students addresses pastoral experiences and theological issues which are presented by the participants through discussion and reflection. The seminar meets for two hours every week and forms an integral part of the Education for Ecclesial Ministry programme. It provides an opportunity and space for students to share and explore the issues they have encountered within the immediacy of their pastoral placements.

In the Education for Ecclesial Ministry programme, the student body is composed of lay and seminary students preparing for ecclesial ministry. They represent a wide variation in age, culture, experience, education, and pastoral ministry. Students who are accepted into the programme in St Patrick’s College have completed an undergraduate degree in which theology was a major component. Many will also have studied to degree level in other areas such as the arts, social sciences, anthropology, psychology or music. The seminarians will have obtained a qualification in philosophy in addition to their theological studies. Johannes Van der Ven proposes that before taking a formation programme for ecclesial ministry, students need to complete courses and seminars in theology, philosophy and other areas such as social science or anthropology.  

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completion of the programme students are awarded a Master’s Degree in Theology, specializing in pastoral theology.

The Education for Ecclesial Ministry programme consists of course modules, seminars, practica, placement education, and theological reflection. Theological reflection aims not just to be a bridge, but also to help students to integrate their ministerial practice with theological knowledge, personal development and their spiritual journey. The students receive mentoring, supervision and spiritual direction within a learning environment that promotes research and learning at both a personal and a group level. Diverse opinions are appreciated and respected and an appreciation of the Christian tradition in its historical and contemporary context is cultivated among the students. The faculty aims to develop the curriculum according to the varying backgrounds, levels of experience, intellectual abilities and educational experiences of the participants. Students are expected to take responsibility for their own learning while being supported by the faculty, spiritual directors and placement personnel. There is a commitment to a community life which is open, trusting and hospitable among staff and students.

1.3 Ireland in the Twenty-First Century

To be engaged in ministry in Ireland at this time calls for great faith and courage due to the enormous cultural and economic changes that are taking place at a local, European and global level. Ann Swindler sees culture as offering a “tool kit” of resources for constructing meaning in today’s unsettled world where it shapes “the diverse capacities
out of which people build strategies of action.”⁴ Charles Taylor calls for an exploration of culture as a source of lived sensibility and not simply as a by-product of social change. It is not sufficient to describe new life-styles; it is necessary to discern the accompanying and less tangible transformation of consciousness. Taylor places an emphasis on cultural rootedness as a blessing – he does not hide the Catholic background of his social philosophy – because without a functional home-culture, people are incapacitated.⁵ He sees a danger in trying to explain transitions in terms of social “determinism” and of an individualistic rationality. Instead he calls us to live mainly from an “unformulated” but “embodied understanding of ourselves.”⁶ Stephen Bevans, in arguing the need for greater interaction between the Gospel and culture, believes that what makes contextual theology precisely contextual:

> is the recognition of the validity of another locus theologicus: present human experience. Theology that is contextual realizes that culture, history, contemporary thought forms, and so forth are to be considered, along with scripture and tradition as valid sources for theological expression.⁷

Michael Paul Gallagher argues that culture is not innocent or neutral, but a battle zone of conflicting meanings, values and images of life at a social and personal level. In Clashing Symbols, Gallagher reminds us that without alertness to the cultural context, pastoral work is in danger of having only a marginal effect.⁸ He identifies how Ireland has:

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⁶ Taylor, “Two Theories of Modernity,” 29.
lived with a largely pre-modern culture until the sixties, before making a rapid move into modernity and, after an unusually short stay in that framework, seems to have moved into the complex fragmentation of post-modernity. Such a passage from pre-modern omnipresence of anchors to modern autonomy, then to post-modern diversity, has created a very different context for all the major decisions of life.\(^9\)

In Ireland, people have benefited from free education at primary and secondary level for over forty years and at tertiary level for nearly twenty years. This education has produced a well-educated and articulate Irish community, both at home and in the diaspora. Gary Hastings has identified how some developments in psychology and sociology are now an integral part of life, often superceding the church in meeting the needs of people at a personal and social level.\(^10\) Sport, the new religion, not Sunday Eucharist is often the main commitment for some people at the week-end. The increased economic prosperity of the well-documented “Celtic Tiger” in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century brought great prosperity to people’s lives. These changes in “affluence stemming from technology [in addition to] industrial, scientific, medical and political developments have changed the culture. Our faith, how we think, our laws, our customs, are changing as a result. The long symbiosis of church and culture is broken.”\(^11\) Contemporary culture has, as it were, “pulled the rug” from under many traditional ecclesial practices. In March 2011, the new Minister for Education set up a forum to examine the “handing over” of 50% of Catholic primary schools to new secular patrons. This development followed an increased demand for choice in local free education apart from that offered by the Catholic Church. In October 2011, the Irish Government closed its embassy to the Holy

See, arguing that it was no longer “economically” viable to keep it open. Any future contact with the Vatican would be addressed by the Department of Foreign Affairs in Dublin.

At the same time, power-sharing and the success of the peace process in Northern Ireland since 1998 – after nearly thirty years of violence – confirm how people can work together, even in their diversity. The slow yet persistent dialogue among sworn enemies has led to a new democratic governing structure in Belfast:

Northern Ireland has made such remarkable progress since the signing of the Good Friday Accord. We’ve had more than a decade of peace and progress and prosperity for many . . . we are here after ten years of peace and we are committed to looking forward to a future where we . . . can create a better life so that every child growing up in Northern Ireland has a chance to live up to his or her God-given potential.12

This is testimony to what can be achieved through conversation and consultation, even where the memory of exclusion and the experience of corrupt powerful leadership runs deep.

In 2007, twelve months before the collapse of the Irish economy, Donal Murray foresaw that while we had developed in many ways as a country during these recent years, all was not well in Ireland. A process that had begun even before the so-called “Celtic Tiger” was a cub, accelerated as it grew in strength, but “underneath that undoubted progress we could hear the disturbing question which gave the title to the first

Céfin Conference: ‘*Are we forgetting something?’*" Murray was being prophetic in his reminder that:

> in Ireland today the question, “Are we forgetting something?” has a particularly unsettling resonance, an unease we share with much of Western society. On the one hand we enjoy new freedoms and possibilities, but on the other we feel like a person skating on a frozen lake who is beginning to suspect that the ice is not strong enough to bear his weight."

In September 2008, the Irish economy, caught in a global economic crisis, crashed unceremoniously. The “Celtic Tiger” died overnight. The multicultural society, which grew during the prosperous years, is still in evidence, though many migrants have returned to their country of origin due to rising unemployment which is now at 14.3%:

> Of the 65,300 people who left the country in the twelve months prior to April 2010, 27,700 were Irish citizens; about 19,900 were eastern European; and 8,100 were originally from states outside the European Union. In the previous twelve month period just 18,400 of the 65,100 emigrants were Irish citizens, while a staggering 30,100 central and eastern Europeans left.

There is growing evidence that people on the edge of society are finding themselves excluded because of reduced funding for government, non-government and voluntary organizations. The ever-increasing number of deaths by suicide in both rural

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14 Murray, “Religion and the Secular in Contemporary Ireland.”
and urban communities is a growing concern.\textsuperscript{17} Drug taking, alcohol, sexual exploitation and trafficking of people are all in evidence.\textsuperscript{18} Research shows that on any one day up to 1,000 women and girls are available for purchase for sex in apartments, hotels, on the streets and in private clubs and massage parlours across the country.\textsuperscript{19} Where does the ecclesial minister find her or his role and identity in this turbulent society?

1.4 The Catholic Church in Ireland

In relation to ecclesial ministry, Van der Ven sees religion operating at three levels: societal, ecclesial, and individual.\textsuperscript{20} At the level of society, he notes that the role of religion in the economic, ecological, political, social and cultural systems could be perceived as contradictory. It seems that society is becoming more secularized and yet religion is still a force that “exerts direct and indirect, desirable and undesirable and often contradictory influences.”\textsuperscript{21} Secularization does not necessarily spell the end of religion but rather the loss of its central place in social life. This can at times make the church defensive. In Ireland “the rapid transformation and secularization of Irish society” was seen as one of the causes of clerical child sexual abuse.\textsuperscript{22} This evil was embedded.

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{17} Central Statistics Office, \textit{Vital Statistics: Fourth Quarter and Yearly Statistics}, 2010. There were 486 suicides registered in 2010 or 10.9 per 100,000 of the population. This compares with 527 suicides registered in 2009, a decrease of 7.8\%. Males represented 79\% of suicides, while females represented 21\%. http://www.cso.ie/en/newsandevents/pressreleases/2011pressreleases/vitalstatisticsfourthquarter2010/ (accessed July 12, 2011).


\textsuperscript{20} Van der Ven, \textit{Education for Reflective Ministry}, 13-43.

\textsuperscript{21} Van der Ven, \textit{Education for Reflective Ministry}, 15.

\textsuperscript{22} Benedict XVI, \textit{Pastoral Letter to the People of Ireland} (Dublin Veritas, 2010), 4.
\end{flushleft}
however, in the clerical ranks long before present secularization in Ireland. In fact, recent
years have revealed that “the scandals are the most powerful secularising force where
they occur,” only accelerating a process that has been taking place for some time.\textsuperscript{23}

Van der Ven argues that it is misleading to speak of radical secularisation or semi-
secularisation. It would be best to speak of a differential secularisation to indicate that
religion exerts a variety of different influences within societal systems, sometimes
reinforcing and other times contradicting each other. Kenan Osborne reminds us that for
the pastoral minister “not to study seriously the findings of the socio-scientific world on
the issues of culture would be myopic.”\textsuperscript{24}

At the level of church, Van der Ven acknowledges that religious practice has seen
a decline in the number of church members, in church attendance and in participation in
the sacraments. The question is: “Where do people find meaning in their lives?” Again
Bishop Donal Murray argued at the Céfín Conference in 2007 that “the conflict is not
between religion and the secular but between the searchers for deeper meaning and those
who believe that human life has no meaning beyond what can be measured, analysed and
scientifically proven. It is a conflict ultimately between faith and the ideology of
secularism.”\textsuperscript{25}

When addressing religion at the level of the individual, Van der Ven sees how the
faith of “the believer” and “the Christian” have been replaced by the freedom and
autonomy of each individual to determine his or her own religious way through life. In

\textsuperscript{24} Kenan B. Osborne, \textit{Orders and Ministry} (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2006), 29.
\textsuperscript{25} Murray, “Religion and the Secular in Contemporary Ireland.”
Ireland, Catholic parishes are no longer the centre of people’s religious or social lives when previously people normally mixed with their “own kind,” that is, people of a similar heart or mind. Gallagher argues that the absence of some level of rootedness in religion by an increasing number of the younger generation means that a loss of such anchors can leave people stranded and adrift at the deeper level of the self, bereft of meaning and of values.  

He sees this phenomenon as engendering both a faith crisis in the church and an anthropological crisis in society. The concept of mission has changed from being the work of a few people from a white, western culture going to some distant lands, to being the responsibility of each person in her or his own lived environment.

Today, mission is the basic and most urgent task of the church, not because of a lack of human action preventing people from reaching some kind of fulfilment, but because to be Christian is to become part of God’s vision and God’s mission for the world.  

At a time when sociologists are abandoning the paradigm that equated modernization with secularisation, in Ireland “like many other countries in Western Europe, there is a post-modern toleration of religion in the private sphere, but considerable suspicion of any attempt to bring a critique to bear on public life from a religious perspective.”

Hastings points out that with the greater availability of multiple choices and the fulfilment of needs from other sources, many people have been questioning their faith

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26 Gallagher, “Religious Readings of our Culture,” 144-145.
and membership of the Catholic Church.\textsuperscript{29} The symptoms he presents are: Sunday attendance, baptism, confirmation, marriage and even funerals as optional or occasional.\textsuperscript{30} Research on religious practice in Ireland by the European Social Survey (ESS) (Round 3) confirms that 43.6\% of Catholics in the Republic of Ireland attend Mass once per week with a further 12.5\% attending more often. 16.4\% attend at least once per month and another one in ten Catholics in the Republic of Ireland attend only on special holy days.\textsuperscript{31}

Comparing the ESS research of 2003 (Round 1), 2005 (Round 2) and 2007 (Round 3), the statistics for Ireland show that some notable trends can be discerned:

In terms of the respondents’ own sense of being religious, there has been some change in the percentage of Catholic respondents feeling more religious over the three year period. Notably there has been an increase in the numbers indicating not religious – the midway point on the scale – from 17\% in 2003 to 21\% in 2005. This has increased to 22.4\% of the sample in the 3\textsuperscript{rd} round of the surveys. In addition, there is a decrease over the time period in the numbers indicating that they are very religious – approximately 6\% of the sample to 5\% of the sample. Between 2003 and 2005, there is a 3.4\% decrease in the aggregated percentage of Catholic respondents attending mass at least once a week.\textsuperscript{32}

The survey records evidence of changing religious attitudes in Ireland over these years. Inevitably, there would be greater evidence of change, specifically, a decline in religious attitudes, if the survey were carried out in post Ryan, Murphy and Cloyne Reports in Ireland. To address these changing trends, the Church needs to engage in an open,

\textsuperscript{29} Hastings, “Growing in Faith,” 403.
\textsuperscript{30} Hastings, “Growing in Faith,” 403.
\textsuperscript{32} O’Mahony, “Religious Practice in Ireland.”
critically constructive dialogue with the community and the surrounding western culture.33

With the marginalization of religion in some sections of society, the significance of ecclesial ministry as a profession had ceased to be obvious or relevant.34 The Ryan, Murphy and Cloyne Reports into child sexual abuse have shaken the trust that people have traditionally placed in the Catholic Church and the regard in which it was traditionally held.35 Gary Keogh writes that “the most influential factor in the decline of support for the Catholic Church, however, was undoubtedly the ever increasing revelations of child abuse.”36 It is argued that child sexual abuse by religious and clergy – and the appalling way that it has been handled by leadership at diocesan and congregational level – are symptomatic of deeper issues within the church.37 Bishop Jim Moriarty, one of four bishops who resigned following the publication of the Murphy report, said that:

 attempts by Church authorities to “protect the Church” and to “avoid scandal” had the most dreadful consequences for children and were deeply wrong . . . It does not serve the truth to overstate my responsibility and

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33 Van der Ven, Education for Reflective Ministry, 11-44.
authority within the Archdiocese. Nor does it serve the truth to overlook
the fact that the system of management and communications was seriously
flawed ... with the benefit of hindsight, I accept that, from the time I
became an Auxiliary Bishop, I should have challenged the prevailing
culture.38

The report on the lack of professionalism, inadequate administrative structures,
exploitation of power and self-protection by church leadership in Ireland in the Murphy
Report has left many people disillusioned. Research presented in recent papers in *The
Furrow*, shows how some people are forthright in expressing some very negative feelings
of anger and frustration with the church.39 Others are critical, and yet also feel that the
church is of value and is significant for them. Still others have simply walked away.
People have become more questioning of what living Christianity means for them. They
are no longer accepting of decisions, made without dialogue or transparency, by people in
leadership. Gerry O’Hanlon describes this crisis on two levels:

at a personal level, [there is] a growing religious indifference and a drift
towards a more secularized vision of life. At institutional level it involves,
among other things, an increasing impatience and anger with the
distribution of power and the non-collegial exercise of governance at all
levels with the Catholic church, a sense that the continuing absence of the
voice and perspective of women in decision-making bodies within the
church is unconscionable, and that church teaching on sexuality and
gender is foreign to the experience of many good people and is received
with incredulity.40

O’Hanlon also writes on how the hierarchy has been mired in a culture of clericalism that
is secretive, defensive and excessively deferential. Unfortunately this is reflected in many
informal conversations among both the “faithful” and “outsiders” whose conversations

38 Jim Moriarty, “Bishop Moriarty Offers resignation to Holy Father,” December 23, 2009,
39 Kevin Egan, “The Sex Abuse Crisis – What Have We Learned?” *The Furrow* 62 (2011): 327-334 and
are peppered with phrases like: “Things will never change;” “The Church is a horrible place for women;” “They just don’t get it;” “The bishops themselves are the problem;” “What kind of parallel universe do they live in?” and “Get real.”

In September 2011, only weeks after the public outcry following the publication of the Cloyne Report and the attack on the Vatican by the Taoiseach (Prime Minister), Enda Kenny, a poll was commissioned by the Iona Institute and conducted by Amárach Research seeking to ascertain people’s attitudes to the Catholic Church in Ireland. The main findings were as follows:

- 47% view the church unfavourably at present: the main reason offered by those who view the church unfavourably are the scandals of child sexual abuse and the mishandling of it by church leadership;
- 46% of the public agree that church teachings are still of benefit to society
- 22% of the public would be happy if the Catholic Church disappeared from Irish society completely;
- one in five people agree that the government is excessively hostile towards the Catholic Church.

Commenting on the poll, Dr John Murray, chairman of the Iona Institute, said:

the poll shows that the public is varied in its attitude towards the Church . . . [it] also seems to show that viewing the Church unfavourably doesn’t in itself indicate anti-Catholicism. This is probably to be found among the 22 per-cent of people who say they would be happy to see the Church vanish from Ireland completely. The poll was conducted shortly after the publication of the Cloyne report when anger at the Church was probably still intense. It would be interesting to see what a poll conducted at a calmer time would find.41

O’Hanlon suggests that a national consultation, assembly or synod would be a real sign of hope in the present situation in Ireland.\(^4\) It could give a focus and added impetus to all the formal and informal conversations taking place at parish, diocesan and national level. He is emphatic that such a gathering would not be a distraction from the need to continue to address the child abuse scandal and keep a commitment to safeguarding children. Rather, it would be a tribute to survivors and victims of clerical/religious child sexual abuse. It should in fact be a sign of repentance from a church now seeking to “challenge the prevailing culture” that gave rise to such a situation. It would be a way for the church to address the deeper cultural factors which undoubtedly contributed to this scandal. These issues include: poor integration in preparation for ministry, especially in the areas of human and spiritual development; clericalism; abuse of power; the hierarchical and closed structure of the church; and an accountability that is only one-way.\(^4\)

On the positive side, there is a continued active presence of ecclesial ministers in parishes, in education, health care and prison ministry promoting the Christian message and maintaining a strong Christian presence in the community. New organisations such as Youth 2000 and the Iona Institute are also giving young people and educated adult Christians some valued support and a voice in today’s society. Close to 800 pilgrims

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from all over Ireland travelled to Madrid for the World Youth Day in August 2011.\textsuperscript{44} The commitment of Irish people, in particular the Catholic community, to the marginalized in Ireland through many charitable organisations, especially the Saint Vincent de Paul Society, continues to grow. People, old and young continue to work overseas in development and evangelical work through Trócaire and in many religious and lay communities which have years of experience in missionary activity.\textsuperscript{45}

1.5 The Research Problem

What is the effect of these social, cultural and ecclesial changes on ministry in Ireland? What needs have to be addressed in ministry formation to face these changes in a creative and constructive way? How do we in the Theology Faculty, St Patrick’s College, Maynooth, bridge the gap between the idealism of the Christian message and the pastoral reality facing the ecclesial minister today? Noirín Lynch affirms the need to keep firmly on the agenda the “gap between what we say and what we do in faith formation,” at all levels of pastoral leadership in Ireland.\textsuperscript{46} In the Catholic tradition, there is nothing in everyday life that is irrelevant to the spiritual life. How, then, can we ensure that future ministers in the church have a sense of both the world in which they will minister and of who they are as ministers in this world?


\textsuperscript{45} An overview of some of this work can be obtained through: Trócaire (the charity organization of the Episcopal conference for the developing world) www.trocaire.org; the \textit{Irish Missionary Union} www.imu.ie; Irish Voluntary Services Oversees, www.vso.ie; \textit{Volunteer-Abroad}, www.eireIreland.org; and the \textit{Conference of Religious of Ireland} www.cori.ie.

One of the main areas of concern that has emerged from conversations about the programme with faculty, students and placement education personnel, is the difficulty that students have in forming and appropriating a ministerial identity. Closely aligned with this is their struggle to see the interconnection between the human, spiritual, academic and pastoral dimensions of the programme. They know that they need to connect theory and practice and vice-versa, but fail to address the fact that these are also dependent on their ability to integrate them with their own human development and personal faith journey. In addition to these, students who have completed their academic theological studies are often at a loss to name and articulate their own operative theology for ministry. Sometimes, overwhelmed by the belief that they have to proclaim and defend all the faith tradition, they become paralysed by the fear that if they do not preach it and if people do not believe it, they will have failed in their duty or displayed disloyalty to the church. So it is that people in ministry believe that they must know all the theology and bring every aspect of it into their practice. Helping students to know the theology that influences their ministry and their own faith journey is vital to the formation of their identity as ministers. Why do they as individual ministers do what they do? What motivates them? Often, it is only when students have integrated the human, spiritual, academic and pastoral dimensions of the programme, and learnt how to name and articulate their theology for ministry, are they able to know and claim their own identity as ecclesial ministers.

In consultation with the students, the Faculty, the theological reflection seminar facilitators and placement education contact persons, a number of causes were identified
for the limited formation of ministerial identity. These included the lack of integration of the four dimensions of the programme, and an inability to articulate a theology for ministry.\footnote{These questions have been addressed over the last two years with students, members of the Faculty of Theology during the pastoral board meetings and with the director and associate director of the programme when meeting placement personnel.} Firstly, there is a diversity of understanding and experience among students of what it means to be a disciple of Christ. In addition, this struggle with Christian identity is often connected to the students’ limited experience of being an active, engaged member of a local community as adult Christian. This has implications when a student tries to find her or his identity in a Christian community as an ecclesial leader or minister and spiritual care-giver without having ever lived life as an active parishioner.

Secondly, students tend to compartmentalize the different dimensions of the formation programme, in spite of its comprehensiveness and the best efforts of the Faculty and placement personnel. This leads to a lack of integration at a personal, academic and pastoral level, making student formation less holistic or inhibiting them from growing into their new role and identity as ministers.\footnote{John Paver, Theological Reflection and Education for Ministry (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), xiv.} When this happens, students are less able to think contextually and theologically or to see pastoral ministry as one theological enterprise among many.

Thirdly, some students are not always clear on how their work differs from that of the social or community worker. This is a symptom of the ministry student’s inability to articulate an operative theology for ministry. They find it hard to recognise or clarify their own embedded and deliberative theology or the theology at work in the situations and experiences in which they minister. In addition to this, students have difficulty
coming to terms with the many models of church they encounter in ministry. Which one do they represent or believe in as Christians and as servant-leaders in the church?

Fourthly, some students who initially thought that there is one ministerial role, which once grasped would give them clarity about their identity, found themselves confused by the multiplicity of ministries that are open to people today. The introduction of the permanent diaconate, the increasing presence of lay ecclesial ministers and the reduction in numbers of priests in a smaller, well-educated, articulate Christian community, has changed the role of ministry for both ministers and people. At the same time, they are experiencing a struggle between the academic theology they may have learnt in the classroom, their image of God, their own personality and the reality of pastoral practice that is challenging their beliefs.

Fifthly, the recent publication of four governmental reports on the horrific crime of child abuse by religious and clergy, as well as the mishandling of the situation by those in leadership in the church over the past forty years, has undermined the place of the ecclesial minister in the community. These revelations have also undermined the identity of the Christian community/parishioners, care-receivers and care-givers, leaving most people feeling uncertain about where they stand in this church that has “let them down” or how what has happened relates to the values of the gospel that they struggle to live. An Amárach research poll, commissioned by the Iona Institute and published in November 2011, reveals that a clear majority of the public overestimate the number of Catholic clergy who are guilty of child abuse. The most authoritative estimate to date, conducted in the United States, puts the actual number of accused priests at 4% in the United States.
However, seven out of every ten respondents in Ireland believe the number is higher than this and 42% put the number above 20%. Of these, 27% believe the number exceeds 40%, and 17% put it at half or more. The ministry of many committed and honest ministers has been challenged or placed under suspicion by these perceptions. Given this challenging ecclesial and cultural context in Ireland today, many established ministers are themselves not always clear about their own identity. Inevitably this has a ripple effect on the minister who is in formation and on what is required within the formation programme to help each one to establish her or his ministerial identity.

As programme director, I witness the energy and enthusiasm among students, even in the midst of their struggles, to be engaged in the mission of God and of the church. Placement personnel speak of the students’ desire to be involved in communicating, serving and witnessing to the reign of God’s love, justice and peace. Students are engaged in catechesis, liturgy, service, community, administration and in the general activities of their pastoral placement. However, theological reflection seminar facilitators speak of how students often fail to see that each of these practices is both theological and ministerial and provides the foundations for the formation of a ministerial identity.

1.6 The Research Question

The question that was addressed in this action-research thesis was:

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49 An Amárach Report “Attitudes towards the Catholic Church.”
What is the role of theological reflection, as it unfolds in the theological reflection seminar, within the Education for Ecclesial Ministry programme, in St Patrick’s College, Maynooth?

The research examined:

- the goals and the process of the theological reflection seminar;
- the integration of the human, spiritual, academic and pastoral dimensions of the Education for Ecclesial Ministry programme within the theological reflection seminar;
- the way in which the seminar enables the naming and articulating of an operative theology for ministry;

The research then looked at how these three areas helped to facilitate the formation and appropriation of a ministerial identity within the seminar.

Finally the research aimed at identifying how this case offers an example that will:

- ensure that the theological reflection seminar remains a central part of the Education for Ecclesial Ministry programme in St Patrick’s College;
- highlight the value of the theological reflection seminar for other theological colleges;
- show when the seminar is an integral part of ministry it can be a valuable tool in enabling the minister to deepen his or her ministerial identity by continuing to
integrate the different elements of ministry and articulate an operative theology of ministry.

1.7 The Contribution of the Research

My hope is that the research will:

- identify the strengths and weaknesses of the theological reflection seminar;
- give suggestions for change on the role of theological reflection, especially the theological reflection seminar, and identify how it could be more effective in education for ecclesial ministry in Ireland and abroad;
- strengthen the need for the inclusion of “regular, formal and disciplined” theological reflection, especially group reflection, as an integral part of ministry and on-going formation for ecclesial ministers.

1.8 Conclusion

The cultural and ecclesial context in Ireland today calls for a variety of new approaches to ministry formation. Today, practical theology is:

an effort to always honour the appeal to human experience, drawing our attention to questions of history, culture, and society, urging us to respond to the real needs of our world, to the conditions of human existence, “on earth.” This is perhaps what is meant by the word “practical.” Yet it is practical theology – an effort to regain the transcendent appeal of God’s word to humanity, an appeal that calls out to us and asks us to be people of God, people of faith, people of hope, people of justice and mercy – a people living and acting on earth, “as it is in heaven.”

50 Terry A. Veling, Practical Theology, (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2005), 18.
As we look to new models of ministry, we are reminded that ministry is determined and established by God’s ministry of revelation and reconciliation through Jesus Christ. In ministry formation we are called to enable students to meet the challenges of ministry, both in Ireland and abroad. In ministry, as in life, there is “rough stuff to be toughed, conflicts to be resolved, pressures to be endured, stresses to be borne, bumps and shocks to be absorbed along the way.” To face this lived reality we need to “stop a while and reduce the wear and tear, the tolls of haste. Take a time in a quiet place to lubricate [y]our life with ease and grace.”

52 Davis, *Heart Gone Walkabout*, 21.
Chapter Two

Framework

Spaces have their own lives. / Let them speak.
Listen to them with your eyes / in the quiet of your mind.
Give them the time they need / to tell their stories
for they are the nurseries and pits of life, / the fields of strength ready for the harvesting
the cultivators of our bigger minds.\textsuperscript{53}

2.1.1 Introduction

The first chapter of this thesis outlined some of the difficulties faced by ministry students in forming and appropriating a ministerial identity. A central dimension of this phenomenon is the difficulty students’ encounter in integrating the human, spiritual, academic and pastoral dimensions of formation for ecclesial ministry. Chapter one also identified some possible causes of this problem – the very problem that gave rise to this research – contemporary Irish and ecclesial culture.

In this chapter I will firstly address the concept of reflection, especially theological reflection within the reflection seminar, and its place in practical theology and professional ministry. Secondly, I will examine the human, spiritual, intellectual and pastoral dimensions of ministry education, which have been presented in recent church documents. By identifying key issues in these areas of formation I will then examine how the theological reflection seminar aims to facilitate their integration within the formation programme. Thirdly, building on this integration process I will look at how theology which, in conversation with a student’s embedded theology provides the foundation for the development of an operative theology for ministry. Finally, I will examine the

\textsuperscript{53} Noel Davis, \textit{Heart Gone Walkabout}, 19.
question of ministerial identity, the formation of which, I propose, is facilitated by the integration of the four dimensions of the programme. This final section will focus particularly on how the theological reflection seminar helps students to form and appropriate their identity as ecclesial ministers.

2.1.2 What is it Reflection?

Reflection is a form of mental processing – a form of thinking – that we use to fulfil a purpose or to achieve some anticipated outcome. We may also simply “be reflective” with no particular outcome expected. While reflection is a habitual activity, it is generally applied to relatively complicated, ill-structured ideas for which there are no obvious solutions. Reflection is largely based on the further processing of knowledge and understanding that we already possess. The word reflection is also used to describe a process of “pulling together” a broad range of previous thinking or knowledge. By “sitting back to review it,” we make greater sense of it for another purpose. “Being reflective” is used as a characteristic of a person’s behaviour rather than a person’s mental activity. The main purpose of reflection is to develop a frame of mind for “being reflective” rather than to see it as an activity. “Being reflective” is described by Moon as “an orientation to practice . . . and it seems to imply a quality in a person who uses reflection frequently, comfortably, and – perhaps by implication – publicly, and who demonstrates that it has value in her or his work.”

In *Education for Reflective Ministry*, Van der Ven takes Schön’s distinction between theological reflection-*in*-ministry and reflection-*on*-ministry and identifies several layers of reflection.\(^{56}\) He sees the need for a methodological approach and argues that theological reflection-*on*-ministry is served by going through the seven phases of Dewey’s analysis of problem raising and problem solving.\(^ {57}\) Theological reflection is a way of looking back on what has taken place with the possibility of imposing some order on a “messy” reality in ministry. Like Schön, Van der Ven also argues for a distinctive structure of reflection which must be susceptible to a rigor that is both like and unlike the rigor of a scholarly and controlled experiment.\(^ {58}\)

### 2.1.3 What is Theological Reflection?

The role of theology in reflection on Christian ministry is critical since this is the element that clearly distinguishes it from other forms of reflective practice. In practical theology, Kolb’s “experiential learning cycle” forms the basis for four phases of a pastoral cycle.\(^ {59}\) Most models of ministry include a dimension of reflection which is directly related to these four phases: experience, reflection, theory and action. Nash and Nash describe reflection on ministry as a way of thinking about complex, multilayered and

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\(^{58}\) Schön, *The Reflective Practitioner*, ix.

unpredictable situations or issues. These are then explored for possible solutions or responses drawing on theoretical and theological understandings. Reflection on ministry calls for self-awareness, cultural awareness, knowledge of previous experiences, intuition and the wisdom of others. Only with the help of these dimensions can reflection be brought to a suitable conclusion.

Theology, as St Anselm reminds us, is “faith seeking understanding.” Theology is also a reflection on religious experience. The starting point of Christian theology is inclusive of both the texts of the past which enshrine original Christian experience and contemporary texts, addressing the present context and pastoral practice. Experience is always interpreted experience, “not by way of an interpretation that is subsequent to the experience, but by one ingredient in the very experience itself, due to interpretative schemas developed out of past experience and brought to the new experience . . . tradition mediates meaning but must itself be open to newness of meaning.”

Margaret Lavin reminds us that theology “is the articulation of our understanding of God and of how God relates to us in our everyday reality.” It is this connectedness between academic theology and pastoral practice that makes “theological reflection” so critical to practical theology since whenever we express our faith, we are also making a theological statement.

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63 Hill, “Theology,” 1012.
64 Margaret Lavin, _Theology for Ministry_ (Toronto: Novalis, 2004), 12.
Killen and de Beer present theological reflection as a way of exploring individual and corporate experience in conversation with the wisdom of a religious tradition. Such conversation calls for a respectful dialogue and draws on a person’s own beliefs, actions, and perspectives as well as those of her or his Christian heritage. Theological reflection therefore “may confirm, challenge, clarify, and expand how we understand our own experience and how we understand the religious tradition. The outcome is new truth and meaning for living.”65 It does not simply apply a previous knowledge of God to a pastoral reality. It is the dialogical nature of theological reflection, with openness to the work of the Spirit, which allows for growth and conversion within the individual and the community. This understanding grounds the reflection process within the theological reflection seminar in the ministry formation programme.

Theological reflection could be seen as being akin to prayer or spiritual direction. It asks the person to consider the difference that God’s presence makes in her or his life and in the pastoral situation. Because the process draws belief and practice into conversation, it calls the minister to grow and change in self-awareness, outlook, motivation and decision-making. It questions one’s faith and demands trust in the power of the Spirit working within the care-receiver as well as the minister. Because the fundamental characteristic of human existence is relationship, there is a desire to articulate the relationality of life, especially the relationships between God and the self, between God and people and between people and with each other. Theological reflection facilitates the possibility of restoring or transforming this relationship, especially in

65 Killen and de Beer, The Art of Theological Reflection, 51.
situations where it may be threatened with destruction in an ill-structured situation. This inner change usually means that theological reflection is action-orientated, bringing about a transformation not only within the care-receiver but also in the ministry situation. The ultimate outcome of theological reflection is the hope that it will draw people into the community of the Trinity and deepen their understanding of how the three persons relate to each other in a non-competitive way, each seeking the best for the other.

2.1.4 The Goals of Theological Reflection

Today, given the challenge posed by a secular culture to the faith tradition, two major questions for many people are: “Is Christianity a viable wisdom tradition?” and “Has the Christian tradition anything to offer people in helping them find meaning in their lives?” While the answer is affirmative from the Christian perspective, if the Christian community is to reflect on the religious wisdom and knowledge of its tradition, it must be done through engagement with the world – not apart from it.

Killen and de Beer identify the deep and compelling drive for meaning as the motivation for reflection. They observed a Pattern in the process of reflection through which people came to a significant understanding of their situation and called it “the movement toward insight.”66 Collins also saw the purpose of theological reflection as the attempt “to discern one’s own operative theology,” and secondly, to “contribute to a healthy sense of pastoral and personal identity.”67

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The immediate goals for theological reflection within the context of the reflection seminar in the Education for Ecclesial Ministry programme are:

- to provide a method with which to process everyday pastoral experiences and to deal with the major questions of life as well as the minutiae of everyday observations – situations that both trouble or affirm ecclesial ministry;
- to achieve a level of integration between theory and practice, thoughts and feelings and the “what” and “who” of ministry – an integration which aims to lead the participant towards intellectual, spiritual, human and pastoral growth as it helps to ensure that all four areas of the formation programme are interacting with each other;
- to enable students to access prior learning and to draw on human resources, personal faith, academic theology and pastoral experiences in order to articulate an operative theology for ministry;
- to provide a framework to nurture a Christian and ministerial identity: who am I as a Christian? Who am I as an ecclesial minister?
- to encourage participants to bring faith into conversation with culture in mutual critique and help them to be open to the possibility of finding the “reign of God” in unexpected places: how are the demands of Christ and culture to be reconciled in the way that faith is proclaimed and lived?
- to transform the relationship between the pastoral care-giver and God, not just to confirm it and return to the status quo;
- to enable participants to explore ways of building and sustaining the community of faith by communicating the Christian faith in a wider society.

2.1.5 **The Resources Accessed in Theological Reflection**

The four primary resources for theological reflection are: the situation, experience or issue; Scripture and the Christian tradition; contemporary culture; and the personal
beliefs and practices of the participants. The conversation among each of these is the central dynamic of theological reflection.

Sources are aspects of experience … Even though we separate experience into aspects to make reflection possible, the meaning of any particular event is revealed only when we attend to those aspects or sources and their mutual relationships … Sources for theology are constructs we put on experience to organize it. 68

By distinguishing these different sources of theological reflection there is a danger that they will be held in isolation. The continual overlap and interplay between the four sources means that theological reflection is an on-going process of “both mutual construction and mutual critique.” 69

To begin theological reflection, it is necessary to identify and select data from one of the resources. Once an experience, issue or theme is named, is it possible to reflect on itself and let it reveal its meaning through different lenses? Paver affirms that it is not ambiguity or ambivalence that is the enemy of reflection but certitude, self-assurance and self-deception. 70 Because in the theological reflection seminar, theology is critiqued by experience and experience is critiqued by theology, it makes it a critical activity in formation.

Mutual critical correlation that is open to change names the process that is used to describe the conversation between each of these sources. Unless material from the sources, which allows for surprises and insights in both directions, is woven together in a way that allows for give-and-take, reflection will be neither engaging nor achieve its

68 Paver, Theological Reflection and Education for Ministry, 14.
70 Whitehead and Whitehead, Method in Ministry, 43.
desired results. The word “correlation” has to be used with caution however, since as Tracy reminds us, the demands of both “the Christian tradition with its embodiment in particular ecclesial communities, and the ever-shifting cultural, political, ethical, and religious situation must be allowed.”  

Killen and de Beer describe experience, the first primary source for reflection, as an interaction between a person and all the other people, places, events, situations, ideas, problems, material conditions, and cultural factors with which they interact and that constitute a person’s identity, context, and world. Foundational to ministry formation is the participants’ experience of Christian discipleship and their personal history. Experience is influenced by what we encounter in our external environment and by what we bring to it. The events that make up a person’s ministry constitute the core text for theological reflection. Inevitably, some experiences are more fruitful than others in the way they hold one’s attention: “they have an impact, they hold surprises, they make a person want to discuss them. They are meaningful.” In theological reflection we tend to focus on the lived narrative – the stories or events that make up a person’s experience. By narrating or describing our experience we enter into it, aware of the inner subjective and outer objective elements. This experience, then, needs to be differentiated as it is impossible to be fully aware of all that is going on in our lives at any one time.

For the Christian, Scripture and tradition, the second source used in reflection, are key sources of guidance in the search for meaning of what God is doing in her or his life.

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72 Killen and de Beer, The Art of Theological Reflection, 21, 54.
and in that of the community. Seeking God’s presence involves theological reflection which can open up new perspectives on experience and provide a deeper understanding and appreciation of the tradition. This conversation with the religious heritage is neither easy nor does it always provide answers. The religious and wider culture of today can pull us in two directions. Firstly, there is the desire to equate Christian faith with certitude and secondly, there is the tendency to prefer secular experience to all other sources of wisdom. Genuine conversation with the Christian heritage, however, enables participants to engage with it without being controlling. Conversation can help a person to be open to wonder without needing to judge. This genuine dialogue creates a safe space for disagreement, yet still allows for an appreciation of the other and has the potential to surprise and challenge through new insights, deeper understandings and appreciations of things already known.74

Culture as a third resource in theological reflection is “not a realm of unredeemed nature, but a mixed environment, partly antithetical and partly complementary to Christian vision.”75 The Christian community will sometimes be affirmed by the culture and at other times be called to confront it. Killen and de Beer address three dimensions of culture and their influence on people’s lives.76 Firstly, culture, narrowly defined includes symbols, mores, assumptions, values, and philosophies of human groups. Secondly, culture involves the patterns of organized interaction within human groups at personal, economic, political, social and educational levels – an understanding of which is

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inclusive of family life and the way we act out our lives as parents, children, adults, friends, community, employees and ministers. The third element of culture is creation: the environment and our stewardship of it. Christian living is never unaffected nor indeed does it ever fail to affect the culture at each of these levels. In a pluralistic and an increasingly secularist society, people are faced with choices at personal, social and environmental levels. The worldview of believers is increasingly shaped by materialism and the social sciences, especially psychology, sociology and economics. Combined with the easy access to knowledge through technology, these choices can have a significant impact on us, the community and the environment. By recognizing the role that culture plays in our lives and in our theological reflection, we can identify how much it shapes human experience and so engage cultural resources and information in reflection.

Recalling the elements of the culture as outlined in Chapter One, theological reflection acknowledges the need to attend to the historicity of a situation to ensure that there is a comprehensive mutual critique of tradition and culture.

Finally, each person comes to theological reflection with his or her own personal embedded beliefs that have arisen from previous efforts to make meaning of the Christian tradition in their lives. The description of an experience or the recalling of the tradition connects the five senses which in turn enrich the description. This subjective awareness is revealed in describing – for oneself and others – what has been seen, felt and heard in the experience. It leads to questioning: “why did this happen?” or “why did it happen to me?”

In an effort to find an explanation for an experience the challenge in theological reflection is not to come to a conclusion too hastily. To do so often imposes a value
system or interpretative framework on a situation that controls “the meaning.” It can also place a barrier between the narrator, the listeners, and the actual event with its revelatory potential. Theological reflection slows down the interpretative process so that a person does not make rash judgements or force meanings that may not exist. Attending to feelings – the embodied affective and intelligent responses to reality as we encounter it – is an important component in coming to meaning, insight and action. Feelings usually include physical sensation. Often it is only when this sensation or emotion is identified that a feeling is named. This bodily sensation in turn involves an affective response, leading to thoughts that help clarify a person’s relationship to the event. As students recall how they exercise their role of service in a parish, their narrative often includes their feelings and relationships within the experience.

2.1.6 Killen and de Beer’s Model of Theological Reflection

A number of theologians have presented several models of theological reflection over the last forty years. In their work, *The Art of Theological Reflection*, Killen and de Beer

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address the need to educate and form people to think theologically. Their concern is to offer people a way “to reflect upon their religious experiences with depth and a method designed to extract enriching insights for their lives of faith.”

For them a central question is: “How does faith inform experience?” Before addressing this, Killen and de Beer first explore the dangers of reflecting on situations from two particular standpoints: the “Standpoint of Certitude” which is often built only on tradition, and the “Standpoint of Self Assurance” which can be built only on one’s own experience. Both standpoints are to be avoided as far as possible since they offer a tunnel vision of a situation and restrict the movement of the Spirit. Killen and de Beer propose a “Standpoint of Exploration,” drawing on both tradition and experience as the most fruitful approach to theological reflection. This approach avoids the extremes of an absolute naïve certitude based on any one authority or an attitude of relativism that relegates all faith differences to questions of individual taste.

The framework for reflection that Killen and de Beer present can be summarized in four movements:

- focus on some aspect of experience, issue, situation or sources;
- describe that experience in order to identify the feelings embedded in those experiences and identify the images that give rise to them so as to focus on the “heart of the matter;”
- explore the “heart of the matter” in conversation with the wisdom of the Christian heritage (which includes questions from Christian themes and material from the tradition source) cultural sources and one’s personal position;

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80 Neuman, Review of the *Art of Theological Reflection*, 313-314.
identify from this conversation new truths and meanings for living that provide vision and motivation for renewed Christian action.  

Many structured processes or methods of theological reflection tend to follow this framework and will vary according to context and purpose. This movement towards insight, which I interpret to be related to the development of “a new truth and meaning for living,” is central to the formation and appropriation of ministerial identity because theological reflection not only creates a bridge between experience and the tradition but also motivates a person for future action.

The first movement in this journey towards insight calls for a clear awareness of and focus on some aspect of a person’s experience. It asks that attention be given to the inner and outer dimensions of experience by attempting to describe it as accurately, honestly and non-judgmentally as possible. Killen and de Beer expand the concept of experience by naming four possible sources: the action or lived narrative of people’s lives; the religious tradition; the culture with its symbols and values; and the personal positions a person consciously holds in a given situation.

The second movement calls for a description that connects us to our emotions and helps clarify the feelings which are a key component of this second movement towards insight. By paying attention to our feelings, we slow down the interpretative processes and stay with the discipline of reflection. Feelings are a significant help in the movement towards insight because they carry the “questions, values and wisdom embedded in our narratives that we may not know how to articulate. Feelings carry the question that we are

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living and they carry the key to the answers.” When feelings are attended to, they often lead to an image which can help unlock the meaning of a situation in a way that is impossible with words. Often, it is in the articulation of feelings and naming a metaphor that helps identify the “heart of the matter.” This can then be stated in a way that does not lose the affective energy of the experience.

The third movement takes the experience, with these feelings, thoughts and images, and explores it in the light of themes from the Christian tradition, culture and the personal stance of the person presenting the situation. The number of sources that are used in the correlation will depend on the purpose of the reflection, the skill level of the group and the time available for reflection. If the correlation becomes too extensive and includes too many sources it can become unwieldy. Correlation provides a framework for allowing material from the different sources to be considered in terms of resonances, patterns, conflicts and more. Inevitably, the conversation moves back and forth among the data that have been gathered from the sources and from the wisdom of the group which gives breadth and depth to the group discussion. This “correlation is intended to be a give-and-take exchange, comparing, contrasting, testing, developing and extending points of contact between experience and tradition.”

Killen and de Beer offer two frameworks for reflection in the context of presenting an experience or situation: “one they call position by which they mean the individual’s attitude, conviction, beliefs and spoken values; the other they call action,

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84 Kinast, *What Are They Saying About Theological Reflection?* 22.
meaning the thoughts, feelings and perspectives associated with action as well as the actions themselves.”

Here attention is given to the intuitive or imaginative side of experience. A person begins with the story or “life narrative” and invites the use of a metaphor or symbols as an additional entry point to theological reflection. Killen and de Beer suggest that the simplest way to correlate data from two or more sources is to use questions of position or action to address the subject matter taken from each source. It is by comparing, contrasting, developing, and extending the responses to those questions that material is provided for the conversation. For example in a reflection on illness, as in the story of the woman with a haemorrhage in Mark’s Gospel (Mk 5:25-35), one could ask from an action source: “What is going on in the scene?” “Who has the power?” “Who has no voice?” From a position source such, as the tradition, questions like: “What seems hopeless in the woman’s situation?” “What in this situation might be seen as a gift?” From a culture source: “How is brokenness presented in society today in television or film?” “Do the media present any possibilities for seeing a gift in the brokenness?” From a personal stance: “What is my experience of brokenness? “How do I face vulnerability?” It is these sources that can develop the method of reflection by enabling people work through thoughts, feelings and actions which “exemplify the human drive for meaning, a drive that the Christian tradition understands as the desire to know reality intimately and ultimately to know God.”

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85 Kenneth Pohly, Transforming the Rough Places (Franklin: Providence House, 2001), 153.
86 Killen and de Beer, The Art of Theological Reflection, 129.
87 Killen and de Beer, The Art of Theological Reflection, 27.
The fourth movement which leads to insight and action may come instantaneously and evoke an exclamation of “Aha!” or “I’ve got it!” Generally, however it comes slowly and often only when a person has been able to let go of expectations or control in the situation. Insight can confirm a belief, or it may offer a different perspective and suggest a new course of action to be taken. This process is informed by the method of correlation by which students engage the religious tradition in a “mutually critical conversation” with contemporary experience, broadly conceived. For Killen and de Beer, the theory that supports the movement towards insight comes from the work of Bernard Lonergan and David Tracy.

The *Art of Theological Reflection* addresses in a practical way, the needs of students trying to develop a habit of thinking theologically. The logical sequence of events, in particular the need to identify the “heart of the matter,” helps participants to be more focused in their reflection from the beginning. Some students struggle with naming their feelings or identifying a metaphor for their experience. My experience of working with groups, however, has shown that those who can address both of these challenges, move with greater ease into a process of correlation with the tradition, the culture and their personal sense of who they are in ministry.

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88 David Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order*, 32-34.
2.1.7 The Theological Reflection Seminar in Education for Ecclesial Ministry

Killen and de Beer’s correlation-based approach to reflection, with appropriate adaptations, is the model and method for the theological reflection seminar in the Education for Ecclesial Ministry programme in St Patrick’s College. The methodology adopted for theological reflection in the seminar addresses reflection-on-action. At the beginning of each academic year, two class sessions are devoted to presentations, readings and discussion of articles on theological reflection. Time is given to group dynamics, the giving and receiving of critique, and the ground-rules for group work. There is a presentation of some sample cases of ministry situations following a critical incident and verbatim methodology, that is, presenting a situation or issue generally requires a written, symbolic or visual “reflection paper” similar to the Killen and de Beer model outlined above.

In preparing a reflection paper, students are not just writing a paper, they are engaging their own dynamic process of reflection as they write. In addition they are then called to integrate that process within their faith journey, human development, beliefs and practices in ministry. The act of writing and reading the reflection plays a key role in the reflection process for the individual as they are called to name and describe the extraneous issues, the “heart of the matter,” and their own operative theology for ministry. Often it is through the writing process, when a person brings her or his own pastoral practice and theoretical knowledge of ecclesial ministry into dialogue, that she or he really sees the different layers within a situation.
This reflection is then shared with the group facilitator prior to the group meeting to clarify any anomalies and ensure its suitability for group discussion. Group reflection following this model calls for discipline and adherence to a methodology by a facilitator. How one engages with a particular stage of the model, and how one moves from stage to stage, makes the role of the facilitator critical. In my experience, students who have confidence in the group facilitator will be more open and honest in their reflection. The group members receive the “reflection” when they gather for two hours at nine o’clock each Monday morning. After time given to “checking-in” by the facilitator, the student who has prepared the reflection chooses the way in which she or he wants to present the situation, issue or experience to the wider group.

Group theological reflection invites people to share a theological conversation in a safe and facilitated environment in order to give more meaning to the practices of their lives and come to a deeper understanding of God within them. The members of a group need time to get to know each other and to build a dynamic of trust that allows for honest sharing. They also need time to find a method of theological reflection that is workable for them, where they can see the whole process while at the same time break it down into “workable” steps. By talking to colleagues about what happens in ministry, students learn how to “un-wrap the shroud of silence in which practice is wrapped.” By sharing their own experience and listening to that of other participants, they recognize that there are a variety of approaches to ministry and a myriad of possible problems, rather than just the one they had seen or taken.

A student, by the very act of sharing his or her theological reflection on a pastoral situation in the seminar, brings the conversation to another level of clarity and insight. Group members reflecting critically on a situation will put words on actions and name beliefs from a very different angle. Students will formulate propositions from their own informal theories or embedded theologies which then become public and testable. Often the insights gained from the discussion by the group will open up new possibilities and different approaches to the ministry situation. Group reflection shared in an attitude of openness and positive critique, rather than criticism, affirms the value of peer supervision, accountability and support. A group, in which trust and confidentiality exist, can keep an individual from distorting or misreading an experience. The interaction and accountability required by group participation affirm the value of community and collaboration in ministry.90

Pattison affirms the power of conversation and the role of the group in theological reflection. For him, to relate faith and practice in a dialogue is a learning experience. It is in this context that the student modifies his or her presuppositions and learns from others in a dynamic interaction.91 In a parallel fashion Warren, Murray and Best describe the discipline and habit of theological reflection for individuals as even more relevant for groups and organizational systems.92

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At a practical level, group theological reflection also enables ministers to develop human skills of sensitivity, awareness, dialogue, critique, decision making and action.\textsuperscript{93} In reflection, especially on a particularly powerful experience, students may have difficulty in identifying their feelings. The energy within a situation, a potential revelation of what a story contains, may block the ability to order events and name feelings. Companions can listen to an incident with “fresh eyes” and ask clarifying questions to establish the scene more clearly. Often they can identify difficulties by naming what they have noticed in the story and by helping to connect thought and body sensation.\textsuperscript{94}

Resistance to group theological reflection by individual members or by a group as a whole can, however, inhibit the process. Some key factors that prevent or inhibit student ministers from engaging in theological reflection are that they:

- think there is one clearly defined way of being an “ecclesial minister” – they fear that what they share will show them up to be inadequate or unsuitable for this way of ministry;
- believe theological reflection is only for experts;
- fear they might be shamed or embarrassed if they are either not good at the process or if the situations, experiences or issues they present are not worthy of discussion;
- are inhibited by a relationship they may have with group members in a different context (for example, seminarians who live in the same house and share community);

\textsuperscript{93} Nash and Nash, \textit{Tools for Reflective Ministry}, 23.
\textsuperscript{94} Killen and de Beer, \textit{The Art of Theological Reflection}, 30.
• do not have clear purposes or goals in their work and then do not understand which aspect of their activity they should reflect upon;
• do not feel they have an obligation to undertake regular reflection because they do not see themselves as having professional obligations;
• do not believe and have not seen that theological reflection can make any creative and positive difference to the way they do their work (often there is a need for people to see examples embodied in other practitioners);
• see theological reflection as an alien demand, “another damn thing,” neither life-nor ministry – enhancing;
• suspect either the academic (understood pejoratively as abstract and complex) roots, or the practical roots of theological reflection;
• doubt the relevance of the exercise to “the real study” of academic theology;
• are often too tired and internally noisy to undertake this activity;
• think of it as an unhealthy introversion which gets in the way of doing immediate, real and urgent things;
• are already doing enough praying and preparation for worship or ministry.

These sources of resistance need to be identified and addressed by the facilitator early in the life of the group. Sometimes it calls for the need to differentiate systematic theological reflection from other kinds of reflective activity and where possible, identify any overlaps, correlations and differences that exist.95

95 Some of these come from my own experience of theological reflection groups and others were suggested by Stephen Pattison, Groping Towards a Definition, http://www.biapt.org.uk/whatpreventstr (accessed July 05, 2010).
2.1.8 Conclusion

In this section I have examined the concept of reflection, especially reflection in experiential learning and practice. Theological reflection, as experienced in the theological reflection seminar, invites a faith element into the conversation as the reflection process tries to integrate academic theology and pastoral practice. I have presented the key goals of the theological reflection seminar which help to direct the process of reflection while engaging with the resources that facilitate the dialogue. Current theories and practices of theological reflection emphasise the need for both individual and group reflection, especially that of Killen and de Beer which I have presented. I will now show how the theological reflection seminar, as presented here, can be an effective means of integrating the different elements of the Education for Ecclesial Ministry programme, enabling students to address and name their theology for ministry and so assist them in forming and appropriating a ministerial identity.

2.2.1 Integration and Theological Reflection

Integration through the theological reflection seminar in ministry education is seen as one way of combining diverse elements of experience and addressing the interrelationship between the different parts of a curriculum. In ministry formation, this translates into students’ ability to make connections between course modules, research papers, placement education, and a commitment to a group theological reflection process. The purpose of these is to see if the student shows an aptitude for pastoral work as well as demonstrating growth as a person who is grounded in a healthy spirituality. Ministry
requires the ability to see that the whole is in fact greater than the parts. Klimoski, O’Neil and Schuth define integration as:

\[ a \text{ formative process that engages students in traditions of theological knowledge, pastoral practice, and Christian identity as they examine, re-interpret, and commit themselves to a world view that bears the deep imprint of those traditions.}^{96} \]

It is not something that can be commanded at a particular moment or be immediately identified in the formation process. The challenge in formation for ministry is to ensure that students possess the skills to organize the experience of learning in a way that the elements of integration are present. Integration, as defined above, presumes that there is permeability between knowledge, spirituality and identity. It presumes that there is openness to new ideas and possibilities in order to make room for change and transformation:

The human desire for a conscious relationship with God, which is often masked by the popular term “spirituality,” requires the integration of body, mind, and spirit for its deepest engagement. In the discipline and habit of theological reflection, we find a framework and a cognitively integrating process available to chaplains and other pastoral care givers for developing their pastoral identity and practice, whether in institutions or congregational settings. Because theological reflection is a way of seeking truthfulness and integrity, it can be adapted and used by pastoral care givers in any religious tradition for their on-going review of self and ministry.^{97}

To foster the integration between scholarly, ecclesial and personal elements of the programme there are clusters of resources that a student can bring to bear in reflecting theologically on an experience. Different ways of human “knowing” which function in

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^{97} Warren, Murray and Best, “The Discipline and Habit of Theological Reflection,” 324.
theological reflection – memory, emotion, association, projection, imagination and speculation – all assist in the process of integration at a human, spiritual, intellectual and pastoral level.

Because experiences of ministry are part of the data of theological reflection, they call into action the care-givers’ affective, intuitive and intellectual perceptions of the experience. These are as vital an element in theological reflection as the wisdom and heritage of the religious tradition. In addition, because this method brings into conversation one’s knowledge of the psycho-social context of the experience, it compels the student to explore and develop his or her pastoral identity. Warren, Murray and Best argue in their research into the discipline and habit of theological reflection in clinical-pastoral practice that “instruction and practice in theological reflection as a formal part of the curriculum provides a way for chaplains, CPE students, and other pastoral care givers to integrate ‘book learning’ with clinical experience, and that it encourages them to mine and explore the rich veins of religious tradition accessible through continued study.”

Their experience of teaching theological reflection has confirmed the need for its inclusion in the curriculum, both in times of distress and crisis and in times of celebration and normal daily life as well. Theological reflection as a distinct practice uniquely distinguishes pastoral care-givers from other health care providers or social workers:

> It can be taught and learnt like other professional skills. It is also more than an acquired skill, because it is a method of training that simultaneously hones mental faculties and shapes character: it is a discipline. Moreover, because theological reflection compels the care giver to develop an integrated pastoral identity, we believe it can and should become a habit both in the behavioural sense of acting in a nearly

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98 Warren, Murray and Best, “The Discipline and Habit of Theological Reflection,” 324.
involuntary way and in the ontological sense as a way of being in and engaging with the world.  

2.2.2 Education for Ecclesial Ministry

Prior to the Second Vatican Council, the dominant approaches to formation were the kerygmatic and ecclesial models. In Protestant churches a greater emphasis was placed on the role of the minister as one who read, understood, interpreted and communicated the Word of God for the community. The ecclesial model adopted by the Catholic Church meant that the priest had to “maintain and expand the church as an institution of salvation in the name of God in order to impress upon the faithful the teaching of the church, administer the sacraments and render assistance to them in their moral and spiritual life.” Even after Vatican II, these models continued to exist in varied forms for a number of years. In the latter part of the twentieth century both denominations learnt much from each other. On the Protestant side greater emphasis was placed on church and church development while programmes in Catholic institutions gave greater recognition to “a broad and deep recognition of the hermeneutically key position of the Bible.” Vatican II, which had begun this process, opened up new possibilities in education for ministry formation for priests side by side with lay people who also experienced a call to ecclesial ministry. With the benefit of insights derived from social science, psychology

99 Warren, Murray and Best, “The Discipline and Habit of Theological Reflection,” 324.
100 Van der Ven, Education for Reflective Ministry, 45.
101 Van der Ven, Education for Reflective Ministry, 46.
and empirical research, these earlier models were replaced or supplemented by therapeutic and managerial models of education.

The therapeutic model, heavily influenced by developments in psychology and sociology, strengthened the need for sensitivity to the human development of both care-giver and care-receiver. There was also an emphasis on communication and authentic self-actualization. However, this model often resulted in insufficient integration between the experiential/emotional sides of human life, the cognitive/conceptual side and the theological issues within the pastoral reality.

The managerial model developed through the “professionalization” of ministry presented a more organized approach to the actual practice and functioning of ministry. It led to a greater application of a professional approach to ministry that takes cognisance of the need for subsidiarity, collaboration and accountability in the work place. However, this “professionalization” did not always do justice to the complexity and the dynamic that characterizes the faith element in the day-to-day practice of ministry.102

In response to the inadequacy of each of these models of formation, Van der Ven proposes a “reflective ministry model” of formation.103 Instead of a technical and technocratic interpretation of the pastoral profession, he argues that we need an approach that is “based on practical rationality and focuses on ministry as a reflective profession, on pastoral work as reflective practice and on the pastor as a reflective practitioner.”104

102 Van der Ven, Education for Reflective Ministry, 45-83.
103 Van der Ven, Education for Reflective Ministry, 9.
104 Van der Ven, Education for Reflective Ministry,136.
2.2.3 Church Documents and Ministry Education

The conciliar documents of Vatican II and other Church documents published since then have endorsed five major changes regarding institutional ministry and leadership in the church:

- the establishment of the mission and ministry of all baptized-confirmed Christians as the foundation of institutional church ministry;\(^\text{105}\)
- the re-establishment of the episcopacy as an official part of the sacrament of orders;
- the re-definition of priesthood;
- the re-establishment of the permanent diaconate;
- the official expansion of lay ministry into ecclesial dimensions of the *tria munera*: priest, prophet and king.\(^\text{106}\)

Each of these church ministries and leadership positions are connected and must be addressed within a comprehensive interrelational framework.

Education for ecclesial ministry in St Patrick’s College is directed by guidelines for ministry formation presented in four Vatican documents and three from Episcopal conferences that have been published over the last twenty-five years.\(^\text{107}\) These address

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\(^{105}\) “Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (*Lumen Gentium*),” in *The Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Walter M. Abbott, (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1967), “... all the faithful of Christ of whatever rank or status are called to the fullness of the Christian life and to the perfection of charity. By this holiness a more human way of life is promoted even in this earthly society,” 40.


the formation of priests, lay people, consecrated religious and permanent deacons for ecclesial ministry. Each affirms that the foundation for Christian mission and ministry is the call to all God’s people to discipleship through Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist. While addressing the identity and formation of each specific ministry group, the documents share a common focus in seeing these take place within the human, spiritual, intellectual and pastoral dimensions of formation.

Timothy Costello sees the approach to formation outlined in the documents as dynamic, integrative and holistic.\(^{108}\) While Costello is referring specifically to the approach to formation in *Pastores Dabo Vobis* and *Vita Consecrata*, the same can be said for all the documents. Firstly, the formation is dynamic because it’s essential framework is relational and developmental. The “call and response” of ministry is a relationship that requires an anthropology which affirms both the desire to respond to God’s call and the difficulties involved in seeking to live out one’s religious ideals within the church.

Secondly, formation, as addressed in *Pastores Dabo Vobis* and subsequent documents, is committed to the integration of the four dimensions of formation: human, spiritual, intellectual and pastoral. These components incorporate the wider community and call for an interdisciplinary approach at all levels of the formation process. Collaboration between institutes of formation and the places of ministry practice are essential so as to avoid compartmentalization, lack of cohesion and poor integration within the programme.

Thirdly, formation is holistic because its aim is to touch the “whole person, in every aspect of the personality, in behaviour and intentions.”\(^ {109}\) All the documents make a close

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link between the processes of initial and on-going formation, seeing them as parts of the same journey of faith.

2.2.4 Diversity of Students in Ministry Education

All the Church documents on formation for ministry affirm that both the ministry formation programme and the teaching methods involved must be adapted to meet the learning and ministerial needs of both the students and of the ministry context in the twenty-first century. Students no longer share the relatively homogeneous social profile of people who entered seminaries forty years ago. Differences among ministry students today are evident in the areas of heritage, culture, education, and church experience. They come with a variety of professional and social experiences, sometimes with little faith development or socialization within a Christian community. Many students have limited experience as adult Christians or of active engagement in a local parish community. Research shows that four broad categories encompass the religious backgrounds of ministry students: those who are deeply rooted in their faith; those who are recently converted; those who enter college after only minimal connection with the church; and those whose stance toward church and life is generally rigid and unchanging even in the face of new information. A few students are committed to the teachings of Vatican II and favour further transformation of the church along these lines, while others may seek restoration of some traditional practices. In education and formation, each of

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the above groups of students will receive the various dimensions of their theological and pastoral formation differently.\footnote{Kliom{m}oski, O’Neil, and Schuth, \textit{Educating Leaders for Ministry: Issues and Responses}, 21.}

The aim of the programme is to maximise the educational experience, integrate the four dimensions of the programme so as to form students who will be reflective practitioners engaging in dialogue and be prophetic ministers of the gospel. Theological reflection on ministry practice and academic theology makes possible “a general and integral process of constant growth, deepening each aspect of formation – human, spiritual, intellectual and pastoral – as well as ensuring their active and harmonious integration, based on pastoral charity and in reference to it.”\footnote{John Paul II, \textit{I Will Give You Shepherds (Pastores Dabo Vobis)}, 71.}

\subsection*{2.2.5 Ministry Education: Four Dimensions of Formation}

Ministry education today tries to address the whole person – mind, body and spirit – rather than concentrating on one narrow area of expertise.\footnote{Timothy Costello, \textit{Forming a Priestly Identity} (Rome: Gregorian Pontifical University, 2002), 85.} Adolfo Nicolás, the General Leader of the Society of Jesus, when speaking about formation for ministry, noted that human formation is the foundation of priestly formation; spiritual formation its heart and centre; intellectual formation one of the means; and pastoral formation the specific finality of formation.\footnote{Adolfo Nicolás, “A Word from Fr Adolfo Nicolás,” \textit{Religious Life Review} 49 (2010): 10-11.} Although treated separately, these four dimensions are interdependent and complementary. Nicolás also identified the importance of the integration of the four areas in formation for ministry today so that students learn to use...
their “God-given talents to serve their brothers and sisters.”\textsuperscript{116} For him, human formation develops the capacity to live and work with others, to exercise leadership in our communities and in projects, and creatively to envision the future steps for mission. Spiritual formation is to be founded on a deep experience of and identification with Jesus Christ; an inner freedom that will enable a person to discern new possibilities and an availability to be sent on mission – anywhere.

Comprehensive intellectual formation will open up the need for dialogue, helping students to see there is more than one angle from which to view a situation or issue and more than one answer to most questions. By truly entering into the life of groups and cultures in which the gospel is shared at a pastoral level, the minister is able to analyse the social and spiritual realities where faith, justice, cultures and religions meet.\textsuperscript{117}

\subsection{2.2.5.1 Human Development}

In \textit{Pastores Dabo Vobis} there is a fundamental insistence on human formation as the basis for all formation.\textsuperscript{118} The rationale for human formation is not just a humanistic desire to develop full personal potential but, rather, the desire to enhance the candidate’s effectiveness for the church’s mission.\textsuperscript{119} The Education for Ecclesial Ministry programme affirms that the student is a necessary and irreplaceable agent of his or her own formation to achieve human maturity and spiritual wholeness. Human formation is carried out in the context of an anthropology that is open to the full truth of the human

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{116} Nicolás, “A Word from Fr. Adolfo Nicolás,” 14.
\bibitem{117} Nicolás, “A Word from Fr. Adolfo Nicolás,” 16.
\bibitem{118} John Paul II, \textit{I Will Give You Shepherds (Pastores Dabo Vobis)}, 43-44.
\bibitem{119} Costello, \textit{Forming a Priestly Identity}, 88.
\end{thebibliography}
person. It aims to lead students toward greater maturity as adults and as ministers in the church. Students consciously enter into a formation process aware that they may have to accept critique and to change their behaviour and attitudes in conformity with the requirements of ministry.

Ministry today requires collaboration and accountability. This implies that the minister understands subsidiarity has a high level of personal, social and communication skills as well as the ability to deal with complex situations and resolve conflicts. Family backgrounds, personal biases, relationships, personality traits and attitudes, as well as the ability to cope with stress and pressure, come to the fore in such situations. The task of the programme is to determine whether or not the student is capable of living with ambiguity and assuming the diverse responsibilities of (priestly) ministry. Failure to integrate human and emotional development into her or his response to God’s call in ministry sometimes leads to a “disconnect” between a student’s words and actions.

2.2.5.2 Spiritual Formation

Spiritual formation aims to animate a true hunger for holiness: a desire for union with God through Christ in the Spirit; daily growing in love of God and neighbour in life and ministry; and the practices of prayer and spirituality that foster these attitudes and dispositions. Personal and communal prayer and celebration of the Eucharist are central to the programme. Regardless of the “way in which God calls, ‘the ultimate realization’ of vocation is ‘transformation in God, by God – our personal deification,’

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121 United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord, 38.
call to radical holiness.” Spiritual direction and retreats are integral parts of the programme both in developing this faith journey and also in providing another context for theological reflection.

2.2.5.3 Intellectual Education

Intellectual education is central to the very nature of ministry and the challenge of the “new evangelization” to which God is calling the church in the third millennium. It builds on both human and spiritual formation. Academic work demands “human intelligence by which one ‘participates in the light of God’s mind’ and seeks to acquire wisdom which in turn opens to and is directed toward knowing and adhering to God.” Regardless of their natural ability and educational experience, students’ attitudes to learning vary significantly. Their openness to learning and a willingness to engage with all the dimensions of the programme will have more influence on their development than many other factors. Some students retain a resistance to change or openness to the different elements of the programme because of preconceived ideas about theology, ministry or ecclesiology. Again research has found that students fall into three main educational groups: those highly qualified; mid-range students who have a good capability for graduate theological work; and finally students who have one or more learning difficulties. Some students use academia as an escape, or take it as an intellectual exercise and fail to integrate it with spiritual, human or pastoral development. Others fail to incorporate the conversation between theory and practice into their pastoral work. This

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integration of beliefs and practice is a real challenge for students as they learn anew what it means to be a Christian disciple and what it means to be a leader among disciples. Here students are encouraged to constantly reflect on the relationship and unity between the theology that is operative in their living and the theology that they have learnt in their studies. As they do, these students gradually come to a greater sense of God’s call and their response to the mission of the church. This understanding of their faith-journey, theological studies, discipleship and of lived reality of leadership in the mission of God is foundational to their ministerial identity.

2.2.5.4 Pastoral Practice

Pastoral theology is a scientific reflection on the mission and ministry of the church as the “universal sacrament of salvation,” as a living sign and instrument of the salvation wrought by Christ through word, the sacraments, and the service of charity. Pastoral formation “cultivates the knowledge, attitudes and skills that directly pertain to effective functioning in the ministry setting and that also pertains to pastoral administration that supports direct ministry.” While these attributes are addressed in the programme, it is through the experience gained in parishes, schools and hospitals that students really grow in their understanding of ministry as a theological experience. Academic studies and pastoral experience are reinforced by mentored reflection in the theological reflection seminar, spiritual direction and one-to-one supervision.

124 John Paul II, I Will Give You Shepherds (Pastores Dabo Vobis), 57.
125 United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord, 47.
The academic studies in theology and the pastoral practice that direct the students are not just focused on scientific, pastoral competence or on obtaining practical skills, but also on ways of being united with the thoughts and actions of Christ: “Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus” (Phil 2:5). Pastoral formation is more than just an apprenticeship, enabling the student to be familiar with some pastoral techniques. It leads the students, especially in the theological reflection seminar, into a conscious and mature assumption of their responsibilities. It facilitates the development of the interior habit of evaluating practice, establishing priorities and looking for solutions to the problems on the basis of honest motivations of faith according to the theological demands inherent in pastoral work.  

The main objective of the pastoral formation programme is to enable students “to reflect upon their pastoral experience to see how academic theology and the tradition of the church throw light on modern pastoral situations and to help [students] gain vital practical skills.” In the programme, theological reflection is seen as central to formation, both in relation to the integration of the different elements inherent within it, the articulation of a theology for ministry, and the development of a ministerial identity. It is through this reflection process that students can see how prayer and pastoral experience are integrated with personal life and academic theology.

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126 John Paul II, I Will Give You Shepherds (Pastores Dabo Vobis), 58.
127 Irish Bishops’ Conference, Programme for the Formation of Priests in Irish Seminaries, 92.
2.2.6 Conclusion

Jesus, in living the mission of God, was called “to a ministry of prophecy, sanctification, and leadership. This ministry is not self-initiated; rather, it depends totally on God.”  

The Son came on mission from his Father. It was in Him, before the foundation of the world, that the Father chose us and predestined us to become adopted sons [and daughters], for in Him it has pleased the Father to re-establish all things. The foundational characteristic of ministry is that it is a response to a call from God. An ecclesial minister enables disciples to follow Christ; to form community for worship, service and teaching; and to enable them to be on mission in the wider community.

2.3.1 Toward a Theology for Mission and Ministry: Food for the Journey

The theology for mission and ministry in which this research is grounded is based on the belief that each person is created in the image and likeness of God. In the covenant model of pastoral ministry, God takes the initiative in grace and love: “I will be your God and you shall be my people” (Ex 6:7). This love overflows in the incarnation of Jesus Christ, God among us. All are called to reflect on this self-giving love – incarnation – of a Triune God. In a Trinitarian community, we are called to maintain relationships of loving communion: God to us, us to God, and us to each other.

128 Osborne, Orders and Ministry, 95.
2.3.2 Theological Anthropology: Imago Dei

Each person is endowed with “the dignity and freedom that flows from God’s grace and love, and salvation in Jesus Christ”\textsuperscript{130} This places the human being at the centre of mission, not as one who dominates and controls life, but who is at the service of all of creation. It is through relationship and community that the human person, created in the image of God, acknowledges that he or she is both graced and sinful. It is “the person in the totality of personhood – mind, body, and soul, living within the context of historical human relational experience in the world, and responding to God’s free self-communication in history – that provides the conditions for a complete theological anthropology.”\textsuperscript{131} This understanding of the human person, in postmodern society “determines how we minister, to whom we minister, and who is mandated to minister within the church community.”\textsuperscript{132} At times as human beings, we ignore God’s love and exploit the freedom that comes with being created in the image of God. In doing so, we fail to honour the freedom and otherness of the human person. Not all the countless faces that we meet each day represent the tangible and accessible image of God. The media, filled with stories about human life – tragedies and achievements – can deface or enhance this sacred image in our society and in our relationships, not just with each other, but with all of creation. Schillebeeckx reminds us that:

\begin{quote}
we have often hidden, spat upon and even mutilated the face of God’s humanity and his care for all his creatures, down to the least of them. Where it is not God himself, but religion, science or some worldly power that is made absolute, not only human beings, but also the “image of God”
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{130} Lavin, \textit{Theology for Ministry}, 16.
\textsuperscript{131} Lavin, \textit{Theology for Ministry}, 20.
\textsuperscript{132} Lavin, \textit{Theology for Ministry}, 15.
are sullied: the *ecce homo* on the cross, and on the many crosses which have been erected and continue to be erected, and also on the *ecce natura* as the polluted world of creation – in animals and plants and the basic elements of life.133

Our refusal to love and to enter into loving relationships shows our sinfulness and diminishes us as persons and as communities. It also blocks our way to salvation. Yet, while sin is part of our human nature, what defines us as human beings is the fact that we are created by God out of love, for love.134 Jesus, by his life death and resurrection, broke the hold that sin and death had over us, and so by being open to God’s grace, we are able to love, forgive and be forgiven. In the *Spiritual Exercises* we are reminded that “The human person is created to praise, reverence and serve God and by this means to save her/his soul.”135 This salvation comes through our desire to live the great commandment: love God, our neighbour and self (Lk 10:27). By loving, we are expressing our human, social and spiritual nature as free and embodied beings: “our human nature speaks to our dependence on God and on our ability for self-transcendence that unites us with God, and our freedom flows from this unity.”136 It is in loving others and God that we find meaning in our lives and define who we are as persons made in the image of God. This salvation is the goal of creation and is at the core of our recognition of the individual dignity and freedom of the human person in ministry.

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2.3.3 Jesus Christ: God’s Love Incarnate

The relational aspect of God is revealed in the self-disclosed word of a loving and personal God in Jesus Christ, through the Holy Spirit. Our God is a personal God who has initiated a personal conversation with us in Jesus Christ. We are invited “to listen and to respond. God’s words are God’s revelation to us, and our response is faith.”¹³⁷ There is a deep desire within us for something beyond ourselves which reminds us that:

we are created by and for God. God can reveal who God is to us because, through this creation, God is already present in our lives. It is precisely because of this presence that we are capable of recognizing God’s revelation. God gives us the potential to listen and to accept God’s personal disclosure and communication in faith, hope and love.¹³⁸

The incarnation, God’s great act of love, unites the human and the divine as Jesus Christ reveals God to us: “anyone who has seen me has seen the father” (Jn 14:9). Jesus by becoming human, has affirmed humanity and all of creation as an expression of God and enabled humanity to participate in the mystery of God. In ministry, it is a challenge for students to remember that they are not “bringing God” to people, but helping people to meet anew the God who is already present in and around them. Through Him, in the power of the Spirit we grow in relationship with God as the Gospel recounts: “No one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal Him” (Mt 11:27). Jesus is the Word, the messiah who through his life, passion, death and resurrection reconciles humanity with God: “What he does emanates from who he is, and who he is determines what he does.”¹³⁹ It is by accessing the presence of the historical

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¹³⁷ Lavin, Theology for Ministry, 35.
¹³⁸ Lavin, Theology for Ministry, 36.
¹³⁹ Lavin, Theology for Ministry, 56.
Jesus and our relationship with God in Christ, through the power of the Spirit, that we come to know God. It is this relationship which influences ministry and builds a bridge between the past and the present. Quoting the prophet Isaiah, Jesus identifies himself as the anointed one:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives  
and recover sight to the blind,  
to let prisoners go free,  
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour (Lk 4:18-21).

He presents the why of mission side by side with the what of ministry revealing his identity and theology for mission and ministry. This theology provides a framework for reflecting on the “nature of the human person, on the relationship between human kind and all creatures of the earth, the relationship between ourselves and God.”

The biblical metaphor “I am thirsty” (Jn 19:28) is central to my ministry. The Samaritan woman in responding to the “thirst” of Jesus is overcome by the revelation of “herself to herself” and of “God through Jesus” in the conversation. It is only when she is “filled” with this experience and knowledge of God, that she is able to share the gift that Jesus has offered her (Jn 4:42). Reflection groups in ministry formation provide this opportunity for conversation and personal awareness in the practice and vision of ministry. On the cross Jesus cries out from this same thirst – the desire to draw others to the Father through Him.

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Jesus called many to be his disciples, his companions in mission. The demands of discipleship are no different today than they were two thousand years ago. Discipleship requires a deep, intimate knowledge and love of Jesus. Learning from the “master,” the disciple is engaged in “public service grounded in the gospel and performed on behalf of the Christian community for the promotion of the reign of God.”¹⁴¹ The life of Jesus and the on-going activity of the Spirit affirm for me that God is reaching out from God’s self. While we are searching for God, God is searching for us even more. “God is love” (1 Jn. 4:8) and it is this extravagant and faithful love that calls all God’s people. Our human worth and dignity come from God and not from ourselves or our personal achievements, either as disciples or as ministers. As we try to live and minister in and through our relationship with God, we reflect the life of the Trinity. We interpret imago Dei as an imago Christi, and imago Trinitatis. Just as the incarnate Lord lived in utmost solidarity with sinners and the poor, just as the eternal life of God is a Triune society, so humanity in its coexistence with others is intended to be a creaturely reflection of the living God.¹⁴²

2.3.4 The Trinity and Community

As Christians we come to know God as Triune: “the Logos incarnate in Jesus, the one whom Jesus called Father, and the Holy Spirit.”¹⁴³ We can only understand the doctrine of the Trinity if we experience a life of communion with and for others in our everyday living. This companionship in community is central to my theology for ministry. When we affirm this desire in God:

¹⁴¹ Lavin, Theology for Ministry, 52.
to seek out the deepest possible communion and friendship with every last creature, and if through the doctrine of the Trinity we do our best to articulate the mystery of God for us, then preaching and pastoral practice will fit naturally with the particulars of the Christian life. Ecclesial life, sacramental life, ethical life, and sexual life will be seen clearly as forms of Trinitarian life: living God’s life with one another.\footnote{LaCugna, \textit{God for Us}, 411.}

This Trinitarian God draws me into the mystery of relationship both in God and among God’s people. Just as Jesus united himself with our humanity and transformed it, we too are called to liberate others in Christ. The Spirit, through us, brings about the union of God with and in humanity, reflecting the communion of the Trinity. \textit{Koinonia} is the foundation of ministry because we “are all joined in Jesus by the Spirit who is the gift, not only to individual believers but, above all, to the faith community. In community, individual believers become a ‘WE’ united in the Spirit working within us.”\footnote{Lavin, \textit{Theology for Ministry}, 96.} Through the power of the Spirit and the call of the community – \textit{koinonia} – we learn that “love ought to manifest itself in deeds rather than words.”\footnote{Puhl, \textit{The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius}, 230:1.} \textit{Diakonia} – service in the broadest sense – is the manifestation in love of the gift and freedom of the Spirit within each one. It recognizes the uniqueness and diversity of each person’s gifts while uniting all in the power of the Spirit to live the purpose for which they have been created “to praise, reverence, and serve God our Lord.”\footnote{Puhl, \textit{The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius}, 23.}

The centrality of the Trinity in my life and ministry is outlined in the opening chapter of the constitutions of the religious congregation, the Sisters Faithful Companions of Jesus, among whom I have lived for many years:

\begin{quote}
In the love which binds in unity
\end{quote}
the Three Persons of the Blessed Trinity
and in that love which they pour out upon the world
we find the model of our apostolic community,
the foundation and strength of our mission
and of our union of minds and hearts…
Strong in companionship with Jesus and with each other
we work together in the service of the Church
to build the body of Christ. 148

2.3.5 Sacramental Theology

Baptism proclaims a person’s commitment to Christ and Christ’s commitment to them.
Baptism incorporates us into the life of God which is indistinguishable from God’s life
with every creature throughout time, past, present or future. It confirms a person’s
membership of the Christian family and the commitment of people to each other. God’s
very life, lived out by persons who love and exist together in communion, is what we
experience in the economy of creation and salvation. 149

Through the key moments of life the sacraments support the individual and the
community: birth and belonging; sickness and health; forgiveness and reconciliation; call
and response; death and resurrection. The sacraments, especially those of initiation, are a
symbolic witness in the community of the presence of God and are channels of God’s
grace and saving presence. As LaCugna writes:

In Baptism and chrismation (confirmation), the Spirit joins us to Jesus
Christ, to his life and death, to his way of being with others, to his total
reliance on God. In the Eucharist, we recall, give thanks for, and celebrate
the Triune union of divine and human, and as bread and wine signify
outwardly, we “receive” into our bodies this communion. These

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149 LaCugna, God for Us, 382.
sacraments of initiation are means by which the Spirit divinizes persons, incorporating us into the very life of God by uniting us with Jesus Christ.\footnote{LaCugna, \textit{God for Us}, 296-297.}

2.3.6 Ecclesiology for Ministry

Theology for ministry is grounded in the re-establishment by Vatican II of the mission and ministry of baptized-confirmed Christians as the foundation of all church ministries. The decision to include the \textit{tria munera} – three dimensions of Jesus’ ministry as priest, prophet and king – in the second chapter of \textit{Lumen Gentium} gives priority to the concept of church as the People of God and unites the mission and ministry of Jesus with the mission and ministry of all the baptized.\footnote{“Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (\textit{Lumen Gentium})” in \textit{The Documents of Vatican II}, ed. Abbott, 2.2.} Through Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist, all Christians share in Jesus’ role as prophet by partaking in the work of teaching and preaching; as priest by growing in holiness; and as king by sharing the service-leadership ministry of the church. The foundation of the mission and ministry of the church is based on three things: God’s sending of Jesus; the mission and ministry of Jesus permeating the church, and that all Christians are spiritually inspired and energised by Jesus’ own mission and ministry. The church as the People of God and the Body of Christ (1 Cor 10:16-17), are images that affirm this sense of mutual enrichment. These images, outlined by Vatican II, also emphasize the church’s dependence on the Triune God and recall the interdependence of all its members, past, present, and future.\footnote{“Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (\textit{Lumen Gentium})” in \textit{The Documents of Vatican II}, ed. Abbott, 1.2.}
The call to ministry, mediated through the power of the Spirit, is not for the individual alone but for the community. It is in Christ that the church finds the source of its unity and the grace that enables transformation to take place. The church is a sign of hope for the coming reign of God in peace and freedom.

As a charismatic community, the Church opens itself to the wisdom and gifts of all the people of God. Today, ecclesiology from a practical-theological perspective must of its nature be deeply aware of its sociological and cultural context. These are not necessarily in competition with each other but in fact witness to the immanent rather than the absolute transcendence of God. Greater understanding of the cosmos and a deeper awareness of the interconnectedness of all of creation are a revelation of the unity of creation and redemption. Paul’s call to the people of Corinth to be “servants of Christ and stewards of God’s mysteries” (1 Cor 4:1) encapsulates the core identity of the ecclesial minister today.

The challenge for all Christians today is to move from an understanding of church as institution to church as community which fosters relationships of mutuality and is reflective of the Triune God. Through critical reflection, trust and conversion, people are enabled to find their freedom in Christ. Pastoral workers need to have a clear sense of what nourishes them on their journey. By working collaboratively in God’s name, ecclesial ministers are mandated to share in the community, and appropriate the revelation that they are created in the image and likeness of God. They remind the community of the interdependence of all of creation.
Pastoral ministers are called to live the central task of the church: the communication of the Word. This is done in the community through pastoral care, catechesis, liturgy, proclamation and service. They also need to have a particular commitment to people who are poor (Mt 5:3; Lk 6:20), and indeed to become poor as Christ did (1 Cor 8:9). Ministers in the church need to be “evangelically inspired, apostolically orientated, democratically participational and pastoral-professionally fashioned.”

We are all called to be collaborators with God and glorify the world through Christ in his life, death and resurrection. Pastoral ministers – nourished by their faith in God and affirmed by the doctrines of Revelation, Christology and the Trinity – are called with the whole community to holiness. They are called to witness to the eschatological nature of the pilgrim church, and be a sign of God’s presence in the community.

### 2.3.7 Conclusion

These doctrines find their “expression in the sacramental life of the believing community as it gathers and ministers as church . . . together, with a theology of sacrament and church, [they] highlight the uniqueness of the divine-human relationship, and provide a theological framework for the definitive features of the human person.” It is through this theological knowledge that pastoral ministers are enabled to name and articulate their operative theology for ministry, share the word of God and serve God’s people.

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The indwelling of the Spirit in our lives calls us to serve in a similar way in which Jesus was called as he began his public ministry. While there are distinctions among the ministries, through baptism all are called to love God and neighbour though servant-leadership:

since the Spirit of Christ acts in them not by the power of their office, but rather in the execution of their ministry, their actions do not differ in principle from any other in the church. In so far as each person contributes in his or her own specific way to the various aspects of church life, that person is acting as a “representative” of Christ to those affected by that action.156

2.4.1 Ministerial Identity and Theological Reflection

Identity is something I am rather than I have and yet it is essentially a socially constructed reality. Ministerial identity, though not easily quantifiable, emerges from who the minister is as a person, and as a Christian. This identity is therefore formed through the exercise of the practices that are an integral part of ministry. These include: witnessing, preaching, worshiping, exercising pastoral care, engaging in social ministry and administration.

2.4.2 Human Identity

Identity centres on the personality, character, originality and uniqueness of a person. It is described as “the fact of being who or what a person (or thing) is.”157 Scientific research

on human identity in psychology shows that it is elusive, developmental, dialectical and relational. Writing in the 1960’s Eric Erickson names a struggle that still exists today:

Identity and identity crisis have in popular and scientific usage become terms which alternately circumscribe something so large and so seemingly self-evident that to demand a definition would almost seem petty, while at other times they designate something made so narrow for purposes of measurement that the over-all meaning is lost, and it could just as well be called something else.

While a person’s identity is something that is constantly being formed and re-formed, it needs to be a unifying force in the day-to-day experience of self and over the years of a person’s life. At the same time, this identity must be distinct and unique among other identities. Evelyn Whitehead and James Whitehead claim that “the movement from adolescence to young adulthood involves a willingness to risk one’s identity, that vulnerable precious sense of self that has emerged, not without struggle, over the teenage years.”

Whitehead and Whitehead, in their work on adult religious development have built their analyses on the work of Erikson. They affirm that at several points over the course of the adult life-span, a person moves into a period of special developmental importance. At each of these stages:

there is a decisive encounter of the person with his or her environment. This encounter is brought on in part by changes within the individual that bring the person to a new readiness for development. This readiness is reinforced by new expectations that make their own demands for change. This meeting of personal readiness and social expectation issues in a critical time in the life of the person.

158 George Schner, Education for Ministry (Kansas City: Sheed & Ward, 1993), 84-84.
161 Whitehead and Whitehead, Christian Life Patterns, 30.
2.4.3 Identity and Vocation

Vocation is a life lived in response to the following questions: Who am I? How do I live? What service do I offer to the world? These are not unrelated since each impact on the other and together they form the identity of the Christian and of the Christian minister.

Vocation is described as a calling to a life’s work, a mission. Coombs and Nemeck define vocation as constituting three interrelated aspects of personhood in adult life: who the Lord calls us to be (our self-identity); how the Lord calls us to become our unique selves in God (our vocational lifestyle); what the Lord calls us to do for God and for others (our mission and ministry).\(^{162}\) Cahalan, drawing on this work defines Christian vocation as:

> The response to God’s call and the Spirit’s charisms manifest in adult life commitments in relationship to three aspects of the self: (1) how I live, particularly in relationship to permanent postbaptismal commitments; (2) what I do, the service I offer to God in and for community; and (3) who I am, the sense of self as it relates to my personal, historical, cultural and social contexts.\(^{163}\)

It is foundational to self-identity that Christians see their whole life in terms of vocation and service which is manifested in each person’s response to God’s initiative. It is neither reserved for a few nor is it limited to one set of possibilities. The Christian vocation depends on God’s free initiative.\(^{164}\) Chapter five of *Lumen Gentium* addresses the universal call to holiness and suggests this is the “one primordial vocation for all Christians, the vocation to be a baptized disciple of Jesus. All other ways of Christian living become simply particular embodiments of this one vocation.”\(^{165}\)

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2.4.4 Christian Identity: Discipleship

Christian discipleship is an identity, a commitment, a way of life and a response to a call. It is not dependent on what a person has or on privileged relationships: “Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother” (Mk 3:34-35). For Jesus, a person’s truest identity in the reign of God lay in being children of God. “Think of the love the father has lavished on us, by letting us be called children of God. That is what we are” (1 Jn 3:1). All else was secondary. Discipleship is inevitably orientated towards companionship of the children of God, in service of the community where a follower joins company with other followers for whom Christ is their Lord and Master.

“Disciple” meaning “pupil,” “follower” or “learner” is the most prevalent term to identify followers of Jesus in the New Testament. In ancient times, and even still today, it is used to describe a “follower of a great teacher or leader,” “one who follows after” and “one who learns.”166 Other terms used to describe people who followed Jesus and who take up a way of life that he embodied and teaches are “those of the way” (Acts 9:2; 19:23; 24:4; 24:14, 22) and “Christian” (Acts 26:28; 1 Pet. 4:16). The three terms – followers of the Way, Christian, and disciple – identify a person as a member of a group who they claimed as their teacher and the way of life they have taken up in accepting that person’s teaching.167

167 Cahalan, Introducing the Practice of Ministry, 3.
Jesus calls his disciples (normally it was the pupil who choose his or her teacher), and this call involves a conversion (Mk 1:17-18). To be a disciple involves learning a way of life that embodies particular dispositions, attitudes, and practices that place the disciple in relationship to, and as a participant in God’s mission. The hall-marks of discipleship are: companionship and fidelity in community; love of God, neighbour and self; compassion and humility; openness to change and generosity of heart; a willingness to share and a desire to forgive; a readiness to break bread and celebrate the reign of God. Cahalan identifies seven features of discipleship for today:

- to be a follower of Christ, committed to learning his ways;
- to be a worshipper, joining Christ and the community in praise of God’s wonders;
- to be a witness who proclaims the good news to the world;
- to be a neighbour by living mindfully of others’ needs and reaching out to them with compassion;
- to be a forgiver by practicing reconciliation, healing, and peace-making;
- to be a prophet willing to tell the truth about injustices that harm neighbours;
- to be stewards of the creation, the community, and the mysteries of the faith.\(^{168}\)

Jesus does not expect his disciples to follow him on their own but by the power of the Spirit working within them and with the support of each other. Discipleship is not an admission of inadequacy of self because one has become a follower of Jesus: it is a trust that the person I follow has something to teach me and a belief that I will have a more

\(^{168}\) Cahalan, *Introducing the Practice of Ministry*, 22.
meaningful life. When Jesus is speaking about the reign of God, he is describing his mission, but also what it means to be a disciple as a member of this community, since it is a contradiction to speak of being a follower of Christ on one’s own. It is in living this commitment of discipleship that Christians discover their true identity in the life of the church.

2.4.5 Ministerial Identity

Jesus called the apostles and disciples and sent them on mission (Mk 3:13-15, Mt 10:1-4, Lk 6:12-16, 10:1-10). After his death both groups saw it as their vocation to continue the mission of Jesus to serve in local communities through the power of the Spirit. Ministry is a distinct vocation and service among many vocations that exist within the Christian community. It does not supplant the self-identity or lived reality of discipleship. It is a deepening of the call to discipleship in and through the Spirit’s gifts or charisms.

Ministry is the vocation of leading disciples in the life of discipleship for the sake of God’s mission in the world. The self-identity of the minister is rooted in Christian discipleship. This identity is deepened by living the demands of discipleship in and through the vocation to ministry. Gaillardetz sees the movement into ministry as “ecclesial repositioning,” through ordination or other rituals such as installation or commissioning, that signify the minister’s new relationship to the community, never replacing but rooted in baptism.

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O’Meara holds that the fundamental identity of the minister is expressed in the six biblical characteristics of ministry. For him ministry is: “doing something; for the advent and presence of the kingdom of God; in public; on behalf of a Christian community; as a gift received in faith, baptism, and ordination; and as an activity with its own limits, and identity existing within a diversity of ministerial actions.”\textsuperscript{171} Cahalan’s definition of ministry expands and elaborates on O’Meara’s basic claims in order to give greater clarity to what ministry involves.\textsuperscript{172}

Whitehead and Whitehead identify five main elements in adult development which have consequential effects on the formation of ministerial identity: time, question, challenge, resolution and change. They note that:

at a point in an individual’s life a particular concern becomes central. This concern raises a significant question to a person, challenges the current state of one’s life and one’s level of self-understanding. The resolution of this challenge will require a judgement, a choice, a decisive action that will carry important implications for what follows in one’s life. As a result of this encounter with myself, I will be different – whether I accept the challenge and move through it to a more confident possession of personality strengths or back away from the challenge and refuse (from fear or lack of support) to face the question it raises about myself.\textsuperscript{173}

Whitehead and Whitehead believe that it is only a strong, but flexible identity that can be open to the new, that can leave room for self-exploration.\textsuperscript{174} The characteristics that Whitehead and Whitehead outline for successful identity resolution are also the very characteristics that are needed for the formation and appropriation of a ministerial identity. These are:

\textsuperscript{171} Thomas O’Meara, \textit{Theology of Ministry} (New York: Paulist Press, 1999), 141.
\textsuperscript{172} Cahalan, \textit{Introducing the Practice of Ministry}, 55.
\textsuperscript{173} Whitehead and Whitehead, \textit{Christian Life Patterns}, 29.
\textsuperscript{174} Whitehead and Whitehead, \textit{Christian Life Patterns}, 74-75.
a supple sense of self: (I have a basic knowledge and acceptance of myself and yet retain some openness to new information about who I am);

an empathy with other people and an awareness of others: an ability to modify myself in response to new information and to the requirements of different interpersonal situations);

the flexibility to incorporate these modification into one’s personality (in a way that strengthens rather than diminishes me);

the creativity which enables [a person] to devise, with other people, patterns of behaviour and lifestyles that are mutually enhancing;

a tolerance for the inevitable strain that is involved in personal accommodation and compromise.\textsuperscript{175}

Cahalan sees ministry as the service and leadership of disciples. She states the functions of ministry and sets a template for some of the areas that will frame a person’s ministerial identity. For Cahalan ministry is:

- leading disciples through the practices of teaching, preaching, worship, pastoral care, social ministry, and administration;
- for the sake of discipleship lived in relationship to God’s mission;
- as a public act discernible in word, deed and symbol; on behalf of the Christian Community;
- as a gift received through faith and baptism, charism, and vocation that is acknowledged by the community in rituals of commissioning, installation, and ordination;
- as a practice that exists within a diverse array of ecclesial contexts, roles and relationships.\textsuperscript{176}

\textsuperscript{175} Whitehead and Whitehead, \textit{Christian Life Patterns}, 29.
\textsuperscript{176} Cahalan, \textit{Introducing the Practice of Ministry}, 55.
Arising from these functions, ministerial identity is first of all grounded in discipleship and in the call to lead disciples. Secondly, it is a public act, acknowledged by the Christian community through commissioning. Both are affirming that the identity of the minister is founded in and flows from the common identity shared by all Christians, is recognized in and through charismatic gifts which itself enables service in the community and is commissioned or conferred sacramentally. One of the criteria for ministerial identity in this research is the student’s ability to lead disciples in the Christian community (indicative of the human and spiritual development of the minister), for the sake of discipleship lived in relationship to God’s mission (theology for ministry). Further criterion will be the students’ ability to be a public witness of a gift received through faith, baptism, charism and vocation and be acknowledged by the community. Ministerial identity is revealed through practice that exists within a diversity of ecclesial contexts, roles, and relationships (integration of the human, spiritual, academic and pastoral dimensions of the programme). Issues of identity and practice are deeply intertwined and with the on-going discernment process about who a person is as a minister and what the call means in her or his life. The public dimension of ministry calls for a level of transparency. The minister must be a sign and witness, providing cues and clues on how to live discipleship. A minister is not some final, fully realized or finished disciple but one who constantly tries to be a faithful, trustworthy disciple in the same way as everybody else.

2.4.6 Conclusion

Church ministry is always in the service of the mission of God. The identity of the minister is not just framed by ecclesial, social, political and geographical factors but also by theology. Differentiation between embedded and deliberative theology is crucial for the establishment of an identity in ministry.\textsuperscript{178} Often in ministry a person’s response is influenced by her or his embedded theology or that of the care receiver. Through evaluating the beliefs which ministers encounter in their work, they can go through a process of evaluating their own personal beliefs – their embedded theology, and construct new ones – their deliberative theology. When a pastoral minister and care seeker engage in deliberative theology they are actively seeking God.

In this chapter, I have presented the concept of reflection, especially theological reflection, as it is experienced within the reflection seminar. Secondly, I have examined the human, spiritual, intellectual and pastoral dimensions of ministry education, and identified ways in which the seminar facilitates their integration and consequently the possible development of ministerial identity. Thirdly, building on this integration process, I identified how theology which, in conversation with a student’s embedded theology provides the foundation for the development of an operative theology for ministry. Finally, I examined the question of ministerial identity, the formation of which is facilitated by the integration of the four dimensions of the programme and the development of an operative theology for ministry.

\textsuperscript{178} Carrie Doehring, \textit{The Practice of Pastoral Care: A Post Modern Approach} (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006), 112.
Chapter Three

Ministry-in-Action

*It takes time to bake a loaf of bread, / to grind, to kneed, to wait . . .
  time for friends to break and share their lives. /*
*It takes time to tend a crop of grain, / to plough, to sow, to wonder . . .
  time for love to ripen and be harvested.*\(^{179}\)

3.1 Qualitative Research

The difficulty that many ministry students have in forming and appropriating a ministerial identity while in ministry formation, was addressed in the opening chapter of the thesis. In response to this reality I chose to research the role of theological reflection; in particular, how the theological reflection seminar assists students in reaching this identity. I outlined the contemporary Irish cultural and ecclesial context in which ministry takes place today. In Chapter Two, I established a theoretical and practical framework for the theological reflection seminar as it unfolded in ministry education. It was through this framework that the findings of the research were analysed. The literature review explored some key concepts of theological reflection, in particular that of the theological reflection seminar, such as: the goals, models and methods of theological reflection; how the seminar facilitated the integration of the four main dimensions of ministry formation; the ways in which the seminar helped students to articulate a theology for ministry; and finally, how these together influenced the formation and appropriation of a ministerial identity in the student. The aim of the present chapter is to present a rationale for the methodology employed in the research and explain the phases of the research.

\(^{179}\) Davis, *Heart Gone Walkabout*, 12.
In this research I recorded, interpreted and presented the experience of five research participants in the theological reflection seminar. I identified how the seminar helped them integrate various elements of their formation programme, articulate an operative theology for ministry and enabled them to form and appropriate a ministerial identity.

Qualitative research is an attempt to access and understand the different way that individuals and communities inhabit and encounter the world. It assumes that human beings are by definition interpretative creatures; that the ways in which they make sense of the world and experiences within it involve a constant process of interpretation and meaning-seeking.\(^{180}\) Within qualitative research, “narrative knowledge is perceived to be a legitimate, rigorous and a valid form of knowledge that informs us about the world in ways which are publicly significant.”\(^{181}\) I decided this research was best served by a qualitative approach as it allowed for experiences and interpretation to be voiced as will be outlined in Chapter Four. In Chapter Five these views will be illumined by and contrasted with the literature previously outlined in Chapter Two.

### 3.2 Research Director

As the research director I considered not just the participants’ experience of the theological reflection seminar, but also the relationship of this experience to the whole programme – and my part within this work. I also looked at the ways in which the seminar could be an enrichment for future ecclesial ministry. Inevitably, the meaning I

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\(^{181}\) Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, 38.
attached to the experiences and ideas of the participants was shaped by my own experience and the values, norms, and concepts I had assimilated in my lifetime.

A key dynamic and an integral part within the process of qualitative research is reflexivity. This process of critical self-reflection was carried out by the researcher in the research. As the programme director and as a student, I took this reflexive approach to the research as it enabled me to monitor and respond to my contribution to the process within the research. Reflexivity is a mode of knowing which accepts the impossibility of the researcher standing outside of the research field and seeks to incorporate that knowledge creatively and effectively. Reflexivity requires an awareness of the researchers’ contribution to the construction of meanings throughout the research process and an acknowledgment of the impossibility of remaining “outside of” one’s subject matter while conducting research. Reflexivity, then, urges us “to explore the ways in which a researcher’s involvement with a particular study, influences, acts upon and informs such research.”

This process of critical reflection enabled me to monitor and respond to my own contributions to the research process, as well as those of the participants. My experience as a facilitator of the theological reflection seminar gave me an insight into the workings of the seminar and its role within the overall programme. I tried at all times to remain critically aware of any evidence of my influence on the learning of others during my research.

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The question of “power over” the research participants was no longer applicable as they had completed the programme and were in independent employment. There was a possibility that their responses would be influenced by their relationship with me while they were students. To address this possibility, the research participants were asked to “bracket” any deference they may have felt towards me as their former director that may have influenced their responses. I also “bracketed” or set aside my own personal bias and belief in the centrality of the theological reflection seminar by staying focused on the thesis question and subheadings and by looking directly for the participants’ experience of the seminar. As the researcher I kept field notes throughout the research. An auditor made field notes during the focus group which I then incorporated into the overall notes taken in the research.

3.3 Research Participants

David Morgan and Judith Brown suggest that in qualitative research a source of four to twelve people is viable for a study. In this case study I choose to have five research participants, drawn at random from a cluster of twenty graduates of the programme between 2007 and 2010. All are at present in full-time ecclesial ministry. These five people, a quarter of the pool available, gave sufficient information to validate the findings. “In practice, the complexity of the competing factors of resources and accuracy

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means that the decision on sample size tends to be based on experience and good
judgement rather than relying on a strict mathematical formula."\(^{184}\)

My rationale for selecting graduates as research participants was that all had been
directly involved in the same model of theological reflection in the same programme.
Now that they were in full-time ministry, they had both ministry experience and distance
from the programme. The research was an opportunity to see if the theological reflection
seminar helped them in any way to form a ministerial identity while they were students or
indeed if it had any long-term effects for ministry. I also hoped that the research
participants would have been able to share any experience of group theological reflection
which they might have had since graduation.

The participants were chosen using probability sampling. That is, people were
chosen as a “cluster sample.” They were a representative cross-section of the people who
participated in the seminar. I aimed to ensure that the group consisted of women and
men, lay and clerical, with at least one from a different culture. This involved multi-stage
sampling, that is, selecting samples from within samples.\(^{185}\) From the women who
qualified for the research, two names were “picked” from a hat. From the men who
qualified for the research, names were “picked” until each category was completed, that
is, lay ecclesial worker, ordained minister and a minister from another culture now
working in Ireland. (While I was aware of this diversity throughout the research, it
seemed to have little impact on the overall findings).

The key considerations relating to voluntary participation are informed consent and confidentiality. A letter and form requesting approval from the Ethics Review Board, University of Toronto was completed and approved. The research was approved by the President and the Dean of the Faculty of Theology of the Pontifical University, St Patrick’s College, Maynooth, where the theological reflection seminar takes place. All participants were given clear information on the central purpose of the research and signed a Consent to Participate Form before committing to the research procedure. They were free to withdraw from the study at any time. They were informed about the procedures to be used in data collection and the disposal of the material at the end of the research. Confidentiality and anonymity were assured at all times. A pseudonym was assigned to each participant to protect anonymity. All data were copied and the originals securely stored.

3.4 The Assumptions Operative in the Research

The purpose of this research was to explore the role of theological reflection, in particular the role of the theological reflection seminar in ministry formation. It addressed the fact that reflection, both personal and communal, is central to learning and is a critical part of the Education for Ecclesial Ministry programme. It was predicated on four assumptions that were addressed within the following areas: goals and methodology of theological

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186 Appendix 2: Approval from the Ethics Review Board, Toronto University and Toronto School of Theology.
187 Appendices 3.A and 3.B: Approval for the Research and the Research Site from the President, and Dean of the Faculty of Theology, Pontifical University, St Patrick’s College, Maynooth, Co Kildare, Ireland.
188 Appendices 3.C and 3.D: Letter Requesting Volunteers to Participate in the Research and the Consent to Participate Form.
reflection; integration within the formation for ecclesial ministry programme; theology for ministry; and ministerial identity.

These assumptions were:

- that a disciplined approach to learning and reflection does not come naturally and therefore requires guidance, methodology and praxis. Theological reflection helps those who engage in it “to make sense of their world” through the disciplined and creative exercise of the theological imagination – by questioning, critiquing, constructing, speaking and writing in the conceptual language of theology. The interaction and accountability required by group participation affirm the need for community and collaboration in ministry;

- that reflection, especially theological reflection within a group, facilitates the integration of the human, spiritual, academic and pastoral dimensions of ministry formation. Through the process of theological reflection, ministry students learn to integrate personal faith, knowledge about faith, academic study and ministry experience and articulate a theology for ministry, and so, in time, appropriate a ministerial identity;

- that theology is a lived/spoken and written language that helps give meaning to life and that theological reflection is one of its dialects. In order to write a theological reflection, the student is called on to articulate an experience and the theology that informs it. In identifying the embedded and deliberative theologies in their own lives and in the lives of the care-seekers, students are led through a
process of integration – both in relation to who one is, and to what one believes in the “doing” of theology;

- that ministerial identity is built on the foundations of Christian identity and a personal understanding of discipleship. The development of ministerial identity is a slow process and is formed through the integration of a person’s human and spiritual development, academic knowledge and pastoral experience and the affirmation by others of one’s suitability for ministry. The development of a person’s operative theology for ministry through the seminar also facilitates the formation of this identity.

To explore the role of theological reflection in developing ministerial identity, these assumptions were operative throughout the research.

### 3.5 Research Methodology: A Case Study

The case study approach that I followed in this research focused on one area of a particular phenomenon.\(^{189}\) Detailed research into one case generally leads to a discovery of things that might not become apparent through a more superficial coverage of several cases. In this case study the focus was an in-depth study of one component of the research participants’ experience of theological reflection, namely the theological reflection seminar.

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Case studies tend to be more “holistic” rather than addressing “isolated” factors. Their aim is to illuminate the general by looking at the particular.\textsuperscript{190} Case studies deal with relationships and processes which are interconnected and interrelated in social settings. In this research, narrative descriptions emerged in which the participants were proactive in the study.\textsuperscript{191} Research in this mode primarily relies on observation, group sharing, interviewing and responding to questionnaires and recording field notes. In case studies, regardless of the research tools employed, conclusions are interactive; emerging not before the period of research, but in conjunction with it. Researchers engage in naturalistic generalizations to describe how such descriptions – once read – spark comparative responses drawn from the reader’s own experience.\textsuperscript{192}

A research method that is proactive positively emphasizes the subjective involvement of the researcher, promotes community interaction as part of all research, and seeks “critical transformation” as a grounding premise.\textsuperscript{193} This proactive case study research method seeks to “stand with” the persons in the phenomenon and the researcher intentionally engages in the experience that is being researched. In addition to finding outcomes, data aims to provide the opportunity to explain why certain outcomes occur. Such a methodology provides a detailed account of the experiences, relationships and processes that took place within the seminar. The data that are then generated by the

\textsuperscript{190} Denscombe, \textit{The Good Research Guide}, 36.
\textsuperscript{192} Myers, \textit{Research in Ministry}, 26.
\textsuperscript{193} Myers, \textit{Research in Ministry}, 28.
researcher’s own internal and subjective process considered to be of great value in building a case study.\footnote{194}{Myers, Research in Ministry, 63.}

\subsection*{3.6 The Boundaries and Limitations of the Research}

This research method was chosen because it has “clear boundaries.” The case study is a “bounded system” in that it is limited by the question being addressed and by time and place as a “within-site study.” In this case study the graduates who participated in the research had been engaged in the seminar in the same programme, in the same college, within a five-year period. The data were used solely for the purpose of the research and will be shredded and deleted on completion of the Doctor of Ministry programme in 2012. The methodology I adopted was inclusive and based on dialogue and reflection. At all times I sought to respect the experiences recounted and value the opinions given by the research participants.

Two significant disadvantages arise from the case study approach. Firstly, it is vulnerable to criticism in relation to the “credibility of generalizations made from the findings.”\footnote{195}{Denscombe, The Good Research Guide, 45.} Secondly, there is a perception that case studies produce “soft” data due to the lack of rigour expected in social science research. In response to both of these concerns careful attention was paid to detail and each stage of the research was recorded and transcribed verbatim to demonstrate the validity of the findings.

There was also a possibility that different experiences, perceptions and group dynamics could lead to such diverse categories that it might have been difficult to draw
useful conclusions. In the research process this did not become an issue. Even though the participants were given three different opportunities to share their experience of the theological reflection seminar, there was a level of similarity to their responses, both positive and negative, in each area. Likewise, within the group as a whole, there was a unity of responses from the individuals that led easily to the formation of themes.

3.7 Implementation of the Methodology: Four Phases

The case study involved “multiple sources of information in data collection to provide a detailed in-depth picture.” A triangulation included the evidence of a focus group, an on-line questionnaire and one-to-one interviews with each research participant. In addition, as researcher, throughout the research phases I kept field notes in which I recorded my observations, reactions, insights and concerns. This provided me with an additional record of the research and served as a back-up to the record of events. This enhanced my own reflection process and helped me to understand how the personal experience of the researcher impacts upon the research process. This material was an additional source of reference for the findings in the research and is included in Chapter Four. An auditor, with the consent of the group, recorded the field notes during the focus group discussion which enabled me to attend fully to group facilitation. She noted body language, group atmosphere, participation and interaction among the participants. I carefully reviewed the field notes after each session and these field notes complemented

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the data received through the audio recorder and provided a back-up if there were any technical difficulties.

There were four phases in the collection of data:

1. The facilitation of the focus group and an initial analysis which led to the formulation of questions for the questionnaire;
2. The administration of the questionnaire on-line to all the research participants who returned their responses within ten days. These responses were analysed on their own and then placed side by side with the analysed data from the focus group. Together these findings formed the basis of a narrative from the first two phases of the research;
3. The narrative produced in this fashion was then circulated to the research participants for their validation;
4. Questions for the one-to-one interviews were formulated from the lacunae that emerged from the first two parts of the research. Participants then took part in a one-to-one interview. They were given time to confirm their satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the narrative of the research findings from the focus group and the questionnaire. Time was also given for any further material they wished to add to the research. The interviews were followed by an initial analysis to identify new material, lacunae or confirmations of the research data. The material was then integrated into the overall finding of the research.
3.7.1 Phase One: The Focus Group

The focus group addressed the questions and the issues that I wanted the research participants to share or reflect upon together. These were:

- their experience of the theological reflection seminar while they were students on the programme;
- how they saw the seminar as one means of integrating the various dimensions of the programme, articulating a theology for ministry and forming and appropriating a ministerial identity;
- how the seminar provided an opportunity for the research participants to raise any other issues that were relevant to their experience while they were students in the programme;
- the experience of the research participants of group theological reflection now that they are in full-time ecclesial ministry.

The focus group provided an opportunity to explore attitudes to perceptions, feelings and ideas about the theological reflection seminar. In this context the emphasis was placed on the interaction within the group as a means of eliciting information. This phase developed trust, rapport, and a sense of connectedness with the participants while at the same time generating valuable data. As the initial method of data collection, it provided a method of investigation in order to find the participants’ reasoning behind the

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197 Appendix 3.E: Focus Group Guidelines and Questions.
views and opinions expressed.\textsuperscript{198} The weakness of this method of data collection is that it is somewhat less controlled than a questionnaire or individual interviews, and the data produced are less structured. Its disadvantage, when compared with participant observation, is that the data are limited to verbal behaviour.

The recording of the focus group was immediately transcribed verbatim. This material was listened to and read several times. It was first sorted into codes, that is, phrases which surfaced in the discussion, especially those that were repeated several times. From these codes the material was grouped into categories which, for me, highlighted the issues that were raised in the codes. These categories were further reduced into themes. Many of the themes that surfaced at this stage reflected the focus of the questions, while new areas also surfaced. I identified the areas which were given much attention and those that I thought still needed to be addressed. The focus group thus provided the material for the questionnaire and the semi-structured interviews as I moved from the general to the specific in gathering data.

### 3.7.2 Phase Two: The Questionnaire

Questionnaires rely on written information which is supplied by people in response to questions asked by the researcher. The information from questionnaires tends to fall into two categories: facts and opinions.\textsuperscript{199} In this research much of the information was in the category of opinion. The main advantage of the questionnaire is that the structure

\textsuperscript{198} Denscombe, \textit{The Good Research Guide}, 179.
\textsuperscript{199} Denscombe, \textit{The Good Researcher Guide}, 155.
imposed on the respondent’s answers provides information “which is of uniform length and in the form that lends itself to being quantified and compared.” The questionnaire was economical to produce and easy to arrange.

The questionnaire was circulated on-line to the five research participants. By incorporating two types of questions, open and closed, there was room for different ways of gathering the information. The first part consisted of eleven closed questions requiring a specific response to the categories that I had decided in advance. There were only one or two responses possible for the questions and these were made with a “tick” or a “number.” In the closed question, the respondents did not have to consider how to express their ideas but choose one or two items from an optional list of five or six.

The open question is more likely to “reflect the full richness and complexity of the views held by the respondent.” The second part of the questionnaire was composed of twenty-five open questions. These left the respondents free to decide on the wording, the length and choice of issues to be raised in the answer. The purpose of this section was to gain more in-depth information on the various areas of the research. The research participants were given “expandable” space after each of the questions to fill in their responses.

This richness was reflected by the responses from the participants as presented in Chapter Four. I was able to note the number of participants whose responses were similar or dissimilar. The strength of the questionnaire was that it supplied standard answers

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201 Appendix 3.F: *Questionnaire*.
since all the respondents were presented with the same questions “with no scope for variation to slip in via face-to-face” with the researcher.\textsuperscript{203} It reduced the personal factor and human error involved when transcribing an interview or interpreting the data. There was little scope for the data to be affected by “interpersonal factors.” For example, if as a researcher I gave a visible reaction or unconscious response to something that was said, the freedom of the interviewee could be compromised. Since I had a student-director relationship with the respondents in the past, the data collected were less likely to be contaminated through variations in the manner in which the question were asked

A number of questions were directed towards the goals and methodology of the theological reflection seminar. I also asked questions in order to gain more detailed clarification of what they understood by “theology and the wisdom of the tradition,” “an operative theology for ministry” and “ministerial identity” since these were the main focus areas of the research. These had surfaced in the focus group, and again I wanted to get more specific responses from the participants. I wanted to know how the seminar had helped the participants to “integrate” the four dimensions of the programme: spiritual, human, academic and pastoral. I was particularly interested to know if the seminar, from the goals they had outlined, had helped the participants to form and appropriate a ministerial identify. Finally, in the last five questions I addressed the future of the theological reflection seminar both in the college and in ecclesial ministry. Again this issue had surfaced in the focus group, but it had only been given a limited number of comments. The responses were all received within ten days of initial circulation.

\textsuperscript{203} Denscombe, \textit{The Good Researcher Guide}, 166.
The responses to the questionnaire were then collated and I again analysed the data. My aim this time was to identify any lacunae or areas that I might have missed in the focus group and the questionnaire. Again, the data was sorted into codes and then grouped into categories which were further reduced into themes. Many of the themes which surfaced at this stage reflected the focus of the questions, while further new areas surfaced again. I identified the areas where there was focus of attention in relation to the themes and those that I thought still required research. When the data were being “coded” and “judged,” it helped me to engage in an on-going critical assessment by asking “What has not been said?” This material provided a narrative account of the experience and ideas of the participants on the theological reflection seminar.

3.7.3 Phase Three: Circulation of the Draft Narrative to Research Participants

The narrative of the findings from the focus group and the questionnaire was circulated to the research participants to validate the findings of the research. They were asked if it adequately described their experience and included their ideas on the theological reflection seminar in the Education for Ecclesial Ministry programme. The research participants were asked to note any areas that they thought were not addressed or particular points that had been omitted with a view to addressing these in the one-to-one interview.
3.7.4 Phase Four: The Interview

The semi-structured interview in the research provided a final opportunity to let the interviewee develop ideas so as to gain insights into her or his opinions, feelings, emotions and concepts. At this stage of the research, I was aware of the possibility of “saturation” of the material related to the research participants’ experience of the theological reflection seminar while they were students on the programme. My aim was that the interview would be an open and easy sharing of views between the research participants and me, as the researcher. The interview offered participants an opportunity to return to any material that they wished to clarify or expand upon from the focus group and the questionnaire. It was also an occasion to introduce any new material they wished to be included in the research. For me as the researcher, the interview was also an opportunity to address areas that I perceived to have yielded inadequate data through the focus group and the questionnaire. It gave me an opportunity to simply ask the research participant to add any further comments, thoughts or suggestions on the role of theological reflection, in particular the theological reflection seminar in the formation and appropriation of ministerial identity in the Education for Ecclesial Ministry programme.

For the interview I had some set questions which arose from a preliminary analysis of the data generated by the focus group and the questionnaire. In this research, the interview surfaced a minimum of privileged information from the research participants since they had shared almost all that they wished to address. There was also an element of flexibility to allow the interviewee to develop ideas and speak more widely
on the issues that were raised. Following each semi-structured interview I conducted with the participants, I transcribed the recording into a verbatim record. I read and listened to the data several times and allowed it to suggest a change in the format or number of the suggested questions for the following interview. I then collated the relevant data from each interview under the themes that had surfaced from the focus group and the questionnaire.

3.8 Validation of the Research Findings

Central to any research is the need to validate the data. As the researcher I had several questions: “Did I get it right?” Are the data being generated on “the right lines?” In this research the data was validated in three ways. Firstly, validity was established by triangulating three sources of data: the focus group, the questionnaire and the semi-structured interview process. The recordings of the focus group and the one-to-one interviews and the hard copies of these research tools provided evidence of all the conversations in the research. Secondly, my field notes as the researcher allowed me to record my own reflections and to deal with the subtleties and intricacies in the responses of the research participants as they revealed their experiences of the theological reflection seminar. This added confirmation to both the process and the data that surfaced in each phase of the research. Thirdly, the narrative of the findings from the focus group and the questionnaire research was circulated to the research participants prior to the interview to

204 Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design*, 201.
ensure that I had faithfully recorded their ideas. While many of the same ideas were repeated in different ways in the focus group and the questionnaire, the very fact that they were repeated was in itself a validation of their value to the participants. At the interview, the participants were free to add any material that they thought had been excluded and to offer any further material in relation to the theological reflection seminar. No research is ever free from the influence of the researcher – qualitative research is always the product of a process of interpretation. To balance this, extreme care was taken at all times to bracket personal bias as far as possible.

3.9 Data Analysis and Presentation

A case study involves “multiple sources of information in data collection to provide a detailed in-depth picture.” The researcher must always keep the following question in mind: “Have I heard, observed, interviewed or seen material which suggests that this specific piece of data can be trusted?” The triangulation of the focus group, the questionnaire and the interview allowed me to deal with the subtleties and intricacies of the data I received on the participants’ experience of the theological reflection seminar. By focusing on methodology and concepts that were involved, and by seeing the case as a whole as well as the many parts involved, I gathered the material into codes, categories and themes. The final analysis led to a collation of the data from the three parts of the action-research into one final narrative of the findings which forms Chapter Four of the thesis. This analysis involved the search for things which lay beneath the surface content.

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of the data: core elements that explain what it is, how it works and what it achieves.\textsuperscript{208} I read all the data several times in order to ensure that I had not missed any subtleties or words or phrases in the research. This required a constant back-and-forth process when reviewing the data from the focus group, questionnaire, responses to the draft narrative; semi-structured interviews and my field notes as the researcher. Each time as I read the data I recorded memos in the margins. These were short phrases to highlight key ideas, concepts, or significant organizing ideas.

On a template, in the first column, the relevant phrases from the data that had arisen from the memos or highlights I had made while reading were recorded. In the second column the data was coded by giving these phrases a code-word or phrase that was descriptive of the presenting idea or concept. Each of the phrases and sentences was taken directly from the verbatim, while I constantly asked the question: “What data are relevant to this action-research?” I then looked for Patterns in the code words and arranged similar codes or phrases together in the table. Coding was a way of moving raw data into more usable form.\textsuperscript{209}

Coding data was an on-going interactive process that helped me make decisions about the direction of the case-study. This process of inductive thinking called for discipline in the coding as it worked towards formulating ever clearer and sharper questions in the light of what had already been observed.\textsuperscript{210} I then refined these codes into categories in the third column. Between twenty-five and thirty categories emerged at

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item \textsuperscript{208} Denscombe, \textit{The Good Research Guide}, 288.
\item \textsuperscript{209} Myers, \textit{Research in Ministry}, 68.
\item \textsuperscript{210} Myers, \textit{Research in Ministry}, 67.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
this stage showing the relationship between sections of data, codes, and categories. Once I had identified the categories I then reduced them into themes. Themes occurred because data displayed similarities. Those that emerged in the earlier notes were pursued, eliminated or confirmed.

The seven themes that emerged from this process of data analyses were:

- the theological reflection seminar: the overall experience;
- the goals and methodology of the theological reflection seminar;
- the role of the seminar in enabling students to:
  - integrate the four dimensions of the programme;
  - articulate an operative theology for ministry;
  - form and appropriate a ministerial identity;
- the theological reflection seminar and the Education for Ecclesial Ministry programme in the future;
- the theological reflection seminar in ecclesial ministry, especially in Ireland today.

All the material formed an integral part of the narrative that was developed together with some generalized conclusions based on the concepts, Patterns and themes that had been identified in the data. This was then related to the material presented in the literature review in Chapter Five.
3.10 Conclusion

A disciplined investigation into a variety of dynamics, covert and overt, that underlie the theological reflection seminar was carried out in the research. By addressing the complexities of the situation, new insights into the role and nature of the theological reflection seminar were ascertained. Some of these insights confirmed the researchers initial intuitive reflections and assumptions, but others, such as the expectation that the seminar, building on the process of integration and the articulating an operational theology for ministry were challenged.
4.1 Introduction

The research for this thesis was focused on the theological reflection process, in particular on the following question: What is the Role of the Theological Reflection Seminar in the Education for Ecclesial Ministry programme in St Patrick’s College. The research focused on five aspects of the seminar, all of which were addressed in the theoretical framework that underpins this research. These areas were:

- the goals and methodology of the theological reflection seminar;
- how the seminar enables the students to integrate the human, spiritual, academic and pastoral dimensions of the programme;
- how the seminar helps the identification and articulation of an operative theology for ministry;
- how it facilitates the formation and appropriation of a ministerial identity;
- how the research participants have experienced group theological reflection since graduating from the programme;
- future changes that might be made in the seminar.

The purpose of this last area was to explore the role of theological reflection in ministry beyond the formation process. While the research was focused on these areas, it was not restricted to them. It was open to new categories and themes that might emerge.

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In this chapter, I will present “an extensive description of the case . . . a body of relatively uncontested data.” The chapter will present the findings from the research participants’ experience of the theological reflection seminar under the headings of the six main themes that emerged. This will mean that any significant references to a theme in the focus group, questionnaire, and the one-to-one interviews are presented at the same time, thus bringing together the three sources in the triangulation process. In addition, the validity of the data presented was strengthened when two or more research participants affirmed a particular theme or a point within that theme. There was no evidence of contradictory statements between the research participants or between the data they submitted in each of the sources. While responding to questions that addressed the focus of the research, the participants also shared additional material, some of which has been included because of its relevance to the overall study. The research questions that were asked as prompts in the focus group were the direct focus of the questions in the questionnaire. For this reason many of the responses in the questionnaire were more focused. These responses repeated much of what had been said in the focus group. From this I judged that the research participants had shared most of what they wished to say on the theme of theological reflection in relation to the seminar.

Some of the same questions were revisited in the interview but the main aim was to look at areas that the researcher judged were not adequately addressed in the focus group or the questionnaire. These included areas such as the research participants

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212 Cresswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design*, 186.
213 The references to the research are identified as follows: (1) F.G. = Focus Group; (2) Q.1. Closed = the responses to the closed questions; (3) Q.1. = the responses to the open questions (1-25) in the questionnaire; (4) I.P. = the Interview with Pádraig, (the initial of the person’s name); (5) F.N. = Field Notes.
understanding of theological reflection and theological reflection in both ministry formarion and full-time ecclesial ministry were also included. After analysing all the data from the focus group, questionnaires and interviews into codes, and categories, thirteen themes emerged from the focus group and the questionnaire. These were then re-grouped into seven themes by the researcher since a number of themes came under one overarching theme. For example, under goals and methodology, it was possible to place areas such: goals of the seminar; presenting a situation; group work; and facilitation.

Table 1

Major Themes from the Research on the Theological Reflection Seminar

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>• The overall experience</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• The goals and methodology</td>
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<tr>
<td>• The level of integration of the four dimensions of the programme within the seminar</td>
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<tr>
<td>• The development of an operative theology for ministry</td>
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<tr>
<td>• The seminar as means of enabling students to form and appropriate a ministerial identity</td>
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<tr>
<td>• The future of the theological reflection seminar in ministry formation</td>
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<tr>
<td>• The theological reflection seminar in ecclesial ministry, especially in Ireland today.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Inevitably, some of the data presented could have been placed under a number of themes. Issues that were raised in one area were also relevant in another. During the research, in particular in the focus group, the participants distinguished between what they thought was happening at the time they were students, and what they now understand to have been happening in the seminar as they look back on it with some years of ministerial experience. Here, Fiona pointed out that she wanted to note “the difference between then and now” (F.G. and F.N). This distinction was significant as it helped to affirm the value of theological reflection both for the student in formation and for her or his future ministry. In the interview, Seán spoke of how theological reflection was a new approach to reflection that had been learned together by the group and that it is only after all these theological reflection seminars that it all really comes together. It takes time to understand, to realize and appreciate the learning that went on. You realize sometimes after that – this is good and it is helpful – and when you think back even to the seminars you have heard years ago, you think they do help and they are still there (I.S).

As a student, Fiona understood that the work of the seminar was to integrate “theory and practice,” but later saw it as a way of “developing your own self-identity as a minister” (F.G). Overall, the responses expressed a good level of self-awareness, insight into formation and ministry, as well as a deep appreciation of the value of the theological reflection seminar.

4.2 The Overall Experience

The overall experience of the seminar by the research participants was that it was influential in their ministry formation. Seán spoke of how it “gets you to think, about
what is going on in your life, in your own situation, in parish” (F.G). The seminar introduced Pádraig into “the mode of reflection” (I.P). For Ruth “it was good to sit in a group of four or five people and discuss what happened to us during our placements, give feedback to each other and more importantly, to encourage each other” (F.G). The sharing within the seminar helped her “to look into herself” in a “relaxed” way and she experienced “a lot of humour” in the group, even with the seriousness of the material (F.G). The seminar was the place, where much of the theology that Fiona had learned at undergraduate level was integrated into the reality of life: “this is where it is meeting; this is now making sense” (F.G).

Seán noted that sometimes other group members could see the individual strengths of the participants in a way that they themselves could not perceive these gifts (F.G). In presenting a situation to the group, that for them might have been inadequately handled, Ruth, Seán and Pádraig spoke of how a new interpretation of the experience would be offered by another person who would see a positive side of the event hitherto unnoticed (F.G). Ruth spoke of how it encouraged participants to “harness their own experience as being ‘jewels’” for [ministering with] people in the future” (Q. 4). It offered an opportunity to explore “feelings” that were experienced before, during or after a ministry situation, looking in particular on the effect these had on their ministry (F.G). Mark had “mixed feelings” initially about the seminar (F.G). He gradually came to realize, however, that after his “initial struggle” that this was a “new way of doing things,” and it was “very positive on the whole” (F.G).
There was a unity in the response to the research participants’ understanding of “reflection” (Q. 1): Fiona saw reflection as “an attitude and/or an attribute that allows you to integrate personal knowledge with past and present experiences” (Q. 1). Pádraig wrote about it as “taking time to look back on ministry to assess the good and the bad . . . and see if I am doing what I set out to do and that what I do is set upon Gospel values and the mission of Jesus” (Q. 1). For Seán reflection was about “giving due thought and consideration to situations I have done previously” (Q. 1), while for Ruth, reflection meant thinking “about my actions in ministry and the thought processes behind them, to revisit my own feelings, before during and after ministry” (Q. 1). Mark saw the process of reflection as “constantly evaluating my actions with the group that I worked with” (Q. 1).

Fiona, Pádraig and Ruth saw themselves as people who reflect “easily” on their ministry while Seán and Mark noted that they reflected “regularly” (Q. 1. Closed). Pádraig said he would not “go there” or be reflective by nature had it not been for the group. He also believed that it was the seminar that helped him to develop the habit of reflection which now forms a vital part of his ministry (F.G).

At other times, it was the common “pool of experience” within the group that was valuable (F.G). Knowing that there was not just one way to handle a situation, since others in the group presented a variety of alternative responses, was a valuable learning experience for all the participants. Mark spoke of how the seminar helped him to be conscious of what he was doing in a systematic and professional manner (F.G). Thus, the
seminar gave a sense of direction to his placement education and general formation for ministry (F.G).

The question of resistance to the process of reflection within the seminar was expressed strongly in the focus group, by all the participants. This was acknowledged as coming from within oneself, from other individuals and within the group as a whole. At a personal level, the resistance was experienced by Mark and Pádraig because “it took [them] out of [their] comfort zone” (F.G). The experience called on Mark to do more reflecting and be responsible: “I was used to a large lecture room or hall where most people would be anonymous” (F.G). In a small group, participants had to make a personal contribution and be accountable and responsible in a public way for their actions. In the past, Mark admitted, he had just been “doing things and moving on without any accountability, without any record taking . . . no grounding of theory in experience” (F.G). His inner struggle with the seminar was to get to know this new way of doing things. When he did, his experience was “very positive on the whole” (F.G).

Seán thought the resistance he felt may have come from a difficulty in identifying the emotions in a situation. At an earlier stage in his formation, he had been helped by a director to identify his own feelings, as well as his thoughts, in a situation; it was now easier for him to share these in a group (F.G). Ruth acknowledged that while she found it easy to share, she thought that some personalities, people who are shy or introverted, may find it difficult to share and so they present a façade of resistance: “there were some people in my group that would not know how to word something” (F.G). For Mark, resistance was also closely related to confidentiality, and the growth of trust among the
group members which took time to establish: “as time rode on, we began to see ourselves as people who had trust in one another and have confidence in other people” (F.G). He then acknowledged that it was from the experience of others that one truly learns – something that only happened when there was trust. For Seán the resistance was perhaps something deep “in the psyche” since putting trust in the group made a person vulnerable (F.G). Pádraig acknowledged in his interview that until the group was a “safe place” to share, there was a block in his openness (I. P). Fiona spoke of a general resistance from some people and it was difficult when group members were not prepared to look at their “own stuff” in a situation, as this hindered the level of honesty and sharing in the group (F.G). Mark spoke of how he initially saw his formation as going from “A to B to C to D” and then finishing. The pastoral experience and the theological reflection seminar interrupted this progress, and was a source of some resistance until he came to see the huge benefits of it (F.G).

The question of resistance was never mentioned in the responses to the questionnaire. Fiona was the only person to mention it and I was aware that it was she who had initiated the conversation on it in the focus group. In the interview, she spoke of there being a “natural resistance” but she also believed that this was more obvious among seminarians (I.F). I did not develop the ambiguity of this statement as this was one of the few places where there was any distinction made between the participation of the seminarians and the lay students in the theological reflection seminar.
4.3 The Process

Seán spoke enthusiastically about how the seminar helped the students to become “reflective practitioners” within their ministry situations (F.G). For him, if people were reflective, they were “thinking or talking about everything that has been said, and you are moving on and you are trying to do it in a different way or to change it or move it forward” (F.G). For Ruth, the title, “reflective practitioners” was not attractive, due to its over use in a recent programme of study, yet, she appreciated the value of being reflective in ministry and was in fact very reflective in her own ministry (F.G).

4.3.1 The Goals

The main goals of the theological reflection seminar as seen by the research group were clearly outlined in their responses to question 4, in the questionnaire. Here there was great unity among the research participants in their goals, which included:

- to develop a reflective approach to ministry (Fiona, Seán, Pádraig);
- to integrate theory and practice (Fiona);
- to set targets and grow in understanding of ministry (Pádraig, Seán);
- to give meaningful interpretation to practical experiences in ministry and providing a systematic method of evaluation (Mark);
- to instil discipline in the students and allowing for critical analysis of materials available (Mark);
- to develop personal, pastoral, communicational and professional skills (Fiona, Mark, Ruth, Seán);
• to explore theological questions and see how experience related to image of God, Scripture and Church (Pádraig, Seán, Ruth, Mark);

• to be more responsible, accountable and disciplined (Pádraig, Mark, Fiona);

• to provide peer-supervision and support (Fiona, Seán);

• to develop ministerial identity (Fiona).

In the focus group, Fiona had differentiated between how as a student she saw the goal as one of integration, but now, with distance and ministry experience, she understands it as a process that helped the students to develop a ministerial identity (F.G). Ruth also struggled with the meaning of what she “was doing . . . ‘What is your placement? What is your role’” (F.G). Other goals that were mentioned in the focus group, which supported those mentioned in the questionnaire, included the need to provide “support for ministry” (F.G). Fiona also believed that the seminar helped her to be a more integrated person and kept her “connected personally with people” (F.G). For Mark it was a disciplined way of exercising collaboration, of being “responsible for your actions, being able to put words into them” (F.G).

4.3.2 The Group

The importance of the group element of the seminar emerged clearly in the focus group and in the responses to the questionnaire. The group helped the participants to be reflective, especially those who were non-reflective by nature or who did not have any previous experience of this form of reflection. Pádraig stated that “I would be lost on my own, I would not go there” (F.G). As a result of his being part of the seminar, reflection
comes more naturally to him now, though it was difficult to acquire the skill initially: “the group works because it forces you to do something you would not normally do . . . because unless we were there, we would never be thinking or reflecting the way we do now” (F.G). Again in the questionnaire Pádraig affirmed that the seminar helped him “to reflect on [his] ministry” as it gave him “a model for reflection” (Q. 5). For Fiona, the group acted as a “mirror, allowing for other perspectives. It led to greater awareness of personal, pastoral and professional strengths and limitations” (Q. 9).

The group called the participants to face-up to situations, which for Pádraig meant that it “lifted you out of your comfort zone, comfort or discomfort . . . getting to the root of things, just getting in touch with a sense of your ministry” (F.G). Ruth spoke of how the human aspect of being part of a group helped the members to tell their story and tease out “serious incidents that would have upset us on placement or whatever, incidents that we were angry about” (F.G). Mark spoke of having presented a paper and then sitting back, only to be shocked into reality by questions coming from the group. The conversation made him aware that in fact he could have done much better in the situation. The group “kept me thinking (because) I never admitted that I should have done things any other way . . . so the dynamism is huge” (F.G).

Fiona wrote about how “listening to feedback and observations expands vision and has helped me to realize my need for the considered opinions of others” (Q. 5). Ruth saw it as helpful to seek others viewpoints, as this “challenges you as well as encourages and supports you” (Q. 5). For Seán the seminar highlighted the fact that most people
appear to struggle with similar issues in ministry (Q. 5). Pádraig was very clear that he “learnt a lot from other people’s experiences” (Q. 5).

There was an acknowledgement that ministers can become isolated and burdened in their work and so for Fiona the theological reflection group “offers solidarity” (Q. 5). It helped to reduce the participants’ sense of isolation in ministry and reduce the sense of failure when problems were encountered in ministry (F.G). Seán acknowledged that without the group element “one might think that they are on their own in their experience” (Q. 5). As trust and confidence in each other grew, so did the depth of sharing within the group, because, as Mark noted, “as time rode on, we began to see ourselves as people who had trust in one another and have confidence in other people” (F.G).

The participants, while being aware of the value of the group, were not blind to the challenges of doing theological reflection in a group. For example, Pádraig spoke of how being part of a group was not easy, since with every group you go into, “there is a certain sense of nervousness, of tension, of uncomfortable[ness] . . . there are boundaries everywhere and people have to keep boundaries . . . so how do we become comfortable so that we can interact at an honest level, so that we are helping ourselves in a group and not hiding ourselves?” (F.G).

The essential group dynamics for the participants centred on questions of “confidentiality” (F.G.) and “honesty” (Q. 21). For Fiona, “a lack of honesty will discredit the validity of the work” (Q. 21). Seán saw the need for a consensus among all involved in terms of wanting to be there and “to take part in an honest, open and
trustworthy atmosphere” (Q. 21). Ruth spoke of how the “limitations may be made by the group itself; ‘the hold of the group’ can paralyse certain members, not to be honest and share, thus not be able to reap the rewards intended for it. After all, we are all human, and it is not an easy thing to share with people, especially with those you don’t know” (Q. 21). In the interview, Pádraig spoke about people’s mentality going into a group and their openness to whatever is going to happen. Here he saw that “there are all sorts of different blockages that can happen for people and for various reasons people need a safe place but once they know that the place is safe, it is okay. It needs to be positive, without this you are fighting a battle” (I.P).

In addition to these factors, Pádraig wrote of the difficulty where group participants may “know each other in different areas” outside the group, “to be totally honest in their contributions” (Q. 21). A lack of trust arising from previous acquaintances may inhibit contributions of complete honesty to the theological reflection seminar.

Another challenge encountered was the situation where a student placement was not “working out.” Here the group process can be undermined (Q. 21). In such situations, or in others where the issue was beyond the competency of the group, Fiona thought that these situations should be dealt with on a one-to-one level (Q. 21). Seán spoke about how he saw theological reflection as a “reflection on life” and on issues in yourself and this makes it difficult to share in a theological reflection group if you are not feeling good in yourself (I.S).
4.3.3 Presenting a Situation

The similarity of responses from the research participants in the questionnaire affirmed what had been mentioned in the focus group about the value of writing and presenting a paper in the seminar. All the research participants were agreed that writing and presenting an experience helped them to be reflective, name the issues in a situation, verbalize feelings, consider the opinions of others and increase solidarity (Q. 6 and 7, F.G). Seán and Pádraig also affirmed these points in the interview (I.S. and I.P).

The act of writing begins the reflective process. Seán saw the exercise as valuable in that once the onus is on a person to write, this “act in itself pushes [you] to be more reflective in order to see where God is in this situation and how this might affect our lives” (Q. 7). He reiterated in his interview that the seminar “gets you into the discipline of reflecting with the background of Scripture and tradition (I.S). Seán also noted, that presenting a paper also “allows the rest of the group to be more reflective and it sometimes highlights areas in [their] own ministry [they] might have overlooked” (Q. 6). By writing, Ruth “learned how to put down situations on paper and explain them step by step” (Q. 7). She confirmed this in question 9 when she noted how this part of the process heightened her self-awareness and altered attitudes which improved personal skills (Q. 9). For Fiona it raised her “awareness on all levels” (Q. 7).

The very fact of writing was a discipline for Mark (F.G). He also noted that it is easier “to say” something than “to write” it and for this reason, the seminar instilled “some scholarly discipline in the student, while not limiting it to it” (F.G). Mark also noted how writing and presenting a paper helped him to know his “experiences” and
“how I am and how I dealt with them” (Q. 6). Mark, because he was writing a paper and presenting it to the group, became aware of a “certain terminology” that is used in the context of study and is often inappropriate in the context of ministry. For example, in presenting his first verbatim “someone picked a particular word I used, only to realize I should have used something simpler or perhaps even not something academic at all” (F.G). Pádraig saw that writing about a situation gave him an “opportunity to reflect, to write and verbalize what I was feeling. Without this exercise the whole process would not have been much benefit” (Q. 7). For Fiona writing and presenting a paper helped to raise “awareness on all levels” (Q. 7).

This act of writing and presenting a paper also helps a person realize the importance of considering the opinions of others. Ruth, from hearing other reflections learned “what to do/not to do” (Q. 6). Both in the questionnaire and in the interview Pádraig revealed how he learnt so much “from other people’s experiences and the group helped us to tease out an issue” (Q. 6 and I.P). Mark learnt from the experiences of others and “improved on my own approach” (Q. 6). He also wrote on how the sharing helped in the “preparation and preaching of homilies, because the group was able to give my reflections some critical analysis: the insight gained from others sharing their experiences or making inputs on mine, turned out to be invaluable assets” (Q. 7). Writing a paper and listening to feedback from others expands a person’s vision: “it offered a broader perspective and revealed a diversity of opinions” (Ruth Q. 6).

In addition to being part of a group, the writing and presenting of a paper, reduced the sense of isolation. Ruth wrote about the realization “that I am not the only one
struggling and finding it hard,” and Mark expressed his awareness that through group sharing he realized that he “was not alone” (Q. 6). Fiona also saw the sharing as a way of “cultivating solidarity” (Q. 6). Seán, in the interview, mentioned how writing and presenting a paper “keeps everyone at the same level” because he noted, “there is tendency to think others never have a problem” (I.S). Then “all of a sudden, they open up something that has happened” and you realize that their ministry is not necessarily greater than yours (I.S). He acknowledged that “it is humbling . . . but it is a leveller as well, because people are willing to share their hurts and struggles with the group and everyone in the group saw each other on the same level. We all struggle at some time” (I.S).

Fiona identified a level of artificiality when it came to writing a paper about a situation for the seminar (F.G). While she was endeavouring to be honest, there was also an element of attempting to save face which skewed her presentation. She was trying to keep the group and the experience in view, and wanted to show that she knew what she was talking about. She acknowledged that “it would not be that you would be lying, you wouldn’t be lying, but you would be trying to make it look better” (F.G).

Seán acknowledged the fear of writing a paper because it forced him to “think about something” specific (F.G). He also acknowledged, however, that sometimes the situation he found most difficult to address often fostered the most learning (F.G). He realized that one of the strengths of presenting a paper was that while he might have seen himself as having done “a terrible job in one way or another, or making a mess of it, then other people say ‘well, hang on, it was not that bad’” (F.G). For Seán presenting a paper was both a humbling and a positive experience: “you think you are high and mighty” and
then the conversation opens up other possibilities (F.G). He also saw that when a person presents a paper, it can “pull a massive cord” for another, either at the time or later on in their ministry (F.G).

4.3.4 The Role of the Facilitator

“A good facilitator is everything” (F.G). Pádraig and Seán observed that the role of the facilitator was “to facilitate, not to get in the way of the process” (Q. 8). For Pádraig the facilitator “above all needs to be a good listener and not push his or her own agenda” (Q. 8). Seán held that another function of the facilitator was to make sure that “no one was overlooked,” that each person could contribute equally to the group” and that the facilitator must “pursue a spirit of fairness and equality” (Q. 8).

The research participants saw that the group work had many challenges and so facilitators needed “on-going education and support in their work” (Q. 21). Pádraig saw that facilitators needed to be able to educate the members of the group about the process of reflection. He was aware that if the theological reflection seminar had been his first experience of reflection, he would have “found it extremely difficult” (F.G). Ruth noted that at times it may be necessary for the facilitator to “find out some of the dynamics of the group and try to “break-in” groups so that they might be able to share better” (Q. 21). The facilitators, as well as facilitating group learning, need to pose questions and offer suggestions that stimulate ideas and knowledge (Q. 10, 20). They need to challenge assumptions or agendas, which sometimes are hidden, but may inhibit group learning (Q. 8). The role of the facilitator was not addressed in the interviews since most of the issues
that were raised by the research participants had actually been addressed in the programme since they had graduated from the programme.

It was thought that the facilitator’s role was a very specific role and that it was not necessary that she or he be members of the “academic staff” (Q. 21). Fiona affirmed how she saw facilitation as “a discipline that is particular to itself” (F.G). For her it was also seen as important that the group members did not feel that there was a “level of analysis” going on (F.G). An “outsider” could bring an element of neutrality, with no apparent hidden agendas or biases (Q. 21). The research participants who had been seminarians at the time of their attendance in the programme were very clear that the facilitator should not be a member of the seminary formation team, as it could be perceived as another level of assessment (F.G).

4.4 Integration

The integration of theory and practice was identified by Fiona as one of the main goals of the seminar (Q. 4). She placed her thoughts on the seminar in the context of her undergraduate studies, which she realised were very much theoretical and “very interesting,” but asked “what good are they to me?” When she entered the programme she realised she was “getting there” and that things were slowly being integrated through the theological reflection seminar. She found herself saying “this theology is now making sense” (F.G). While distinguishing between her experience at the time and how she sees it now in retrospect, she described her moment of insight into the real value of reflection:

I just landed, I just landed literally, you know. I just thought there is really much more in this. You know, you can go really deep with this if
you want to, and always there is something you are searching for, in the experience or in the dialogue, there is something here, there is some truth, there is some key, there is something, that can push you forward: personally, professionally and pastorally. And there is a lot of stuff going on at different levels as well, not only for you, it is a dialogue for you, but it is also a dialogue for them as well, because there is always a dialogue going on (F.G).

Fiona openly acknowledged that while only the seeds of her understanding of the value of reflection were there at this stage, she was beginning to grasp the process: “I was starting to kind of . . . getting the ‘scent’ of it, but I wouldn’t say I actually had a handle on it, even though I was that interested” (F.G).

Seán saw integration as something that happens naturally because the human, spiritual, academic and pastoral dimensions of the programme “are intertwined in all situations and they only appear to be recognized through reflection” (Q. 9). Pádraig confirmed the need to integrate these areas and the reflection group has “helped me see the importance of [integration]” (Q. 9). Ruth was aware that through personal and group reflection the seminar “opens up your idea of faith and you have to apply academic theology to it” (Q. 9). This happens in particular when members are asked to address the “type of Church, image of God and Scripture” they are “working out of” in their ministry (Q. 9).

For Mark, pastoral work took place through the interaction with the context: “a dialogue between culture, tradition and Scripture” (F.G). He also acknowledged in the questionnaire that the seminar “challenged his perceptions” in his ministerial work (Q. 9). When the research group was asked which part of the seminar helped best with the process of integration, “presenting a paper” was identified by two people, the value of
“discussion” was mentioned by two others and a fifth named “the heart of the matter” (Q. 3 Closed).

### 4.4.1 Human Development

On a human level, theological reflection helped students to see the reasons behind their actions, and be more integrated as persons. By reflecting on how they ministered prior to, during and after a pastoral experience, they became more aware of both their own reactions and those of others and “to accept people for who they are” (Q. 4). The responses from others helped to ground experiences, by challenging them to engage more critically with who they were and what they were doing (Q. 4). The experience of being part of a group helped the participants critique their thoughts and actions which were often only clarified by the responses from the group members (Q. 5). Theological reflection put a person in touch with her or his feelings and challenged the person to reflect on what was “stirring-up” these feelings at particular times (F.G). For Fiona it heightened self-awareness of “personal, pastoral and professional strengths and limitations” (Q. 9).

Seán observed that in ministry, “the minister is to some degree a broken person and carries hurts and concerns like everybody else, but also has his or her own faith journey and the belief in what they do and who they are” (Q. 12). For him, this human vulnerability was addressed in the seminar. While it looks on the positive, it is also “noting that there is a genuine care and concern for those whom we minister to” (Q. 12). This human reality was also addressed by Ruth. She spoke of presenting a ministry
situation where a young person was showing disrespect for the Eucharist. With the help of the group, she came to see that the real issue in the situation was not the disrespect of the young person but her own anger, because her theology for ministry was being challenged. Gradually she learned to address this human emotion when she saw the impact it had on her work (F.G). Listening to the possible diversity of approaches and views – even within a small group – also helped Fiona to move beyond her own little world and to “stretch herself” all the time: “someone else comes in and they see something different and they come at it from another angle” (F.G).

The seminar called upon the participants to address questions that made them face their identity and role as ministers and consider how they could integrate both of these in their lives. For Pádraig some key questions centred on: “What is your role? Who are you outside of your role? Who are you when you are in your role? How do you integrate it with your life? I suppose this is the big issue” (F.G).

4.4.2 Spiritual Development

In reviewing both the focus group data and the responses to the questionnaire it seemed that spiritual integration took place for most of the participants within the context of developing their theology for ministry (Q. 11, 12). When asked about their image of God or the Scripture resources that underlined their ministry within the seminar, there was a deep awareness that their own spiritual growth and theology for ministry were being challenged. They had to make connections with the pastoral context in which they ministered (Q. 10, 11, 12). Ruth admitted that “it made me aware of the reason behind my
actions” (Q. 10). In the questionnaire, she confirmed that the seminar helped change her perception of “theological concepts from static lifeless theories/doctrines to fluid dynamic realities that support spiritual care” (Q. 9).

When asked for a phrase that best describes the research participants operative theology for ministry, the scriptural images of God presented in response to question 13 included: “God is with us,” “Love the Lord your God and your neighbour as yourself,” “the Spirit of the Lord has anointed me to bring the good news . . . My grace is sufficient for you,” and “God as love” (Q. 13). These became a source of spiritual inspiration for students when reflecting in and on ministry (Q. 13). For the entire group, there was a gradual realization of the importance of integrating Scripture and the tradition in their ministry (Q. 11). Pádraig articulated this awareness: “because all papers presented are focused on Scripture and on tradition . . . I would automatically apply a Scripture image now more so than I would before this experience.” Pádraig noted that “whatever situation I find myself in I tend to ask myself the question, ‘What would Jesus do in this situation?’ I think of passages of Scripture which are relevant to the situation or maybe of something from the lives of the saints” (Q. 11).

4.4.3 Academic Study

Mark, who was focused on his qualifications, observed: “When we started I was thinking, this is just about gathering, talking, discussing and evaluating. How is this academic as well . . . we are aiming at a qualification” (F.G). The process of reflection helped him to see how important the human, spiritual, academic and pastoral areas of the programme
were and the need to integrate them in his ministry. The seminar was both a “good practical and theoretical experience” (F.G).

Fiona concurred with this stance as she too had come to value the integration of theory and practice. Through the merging of church and tradition with experience: “being able to make connections with Scripture and tradition” facilitated integration in the programme (F.G). For the participants, Scripture and ecclesiology had become foundational to their ministry. The experience of being asked to reflect on how Scripture, image of God and model of church grounded their work in ministry. Mark acknowledged that he “would no longer look at Scripture as a collection of writings, written 2,000 years ago, but as something coming alive at every moment and in different contexts and circumstances” (Q. 11). Mark spoke of the difference between Scripture as a purely academic exercise in a college lecture, and Scripture for ministry where it is “translated into real experience” (F.G). Here, the very act of having to write a paper – putting it down, writing it down for others, doing it” – called Mark to integrate theory and practice for ministry (F.G). The research participants made no reference to the role of systematic, moral or liturgical theology in the theological reflection seminar.

4.4.4 The Pastoral Experience

Fiona found that “working with different experiences within the group” gave her a “sense of the issues and possible approaches/responses” that a pastoral situation requires (Q. 10). Nearly all the participants spoke of how theological reflection helped toward a “recognition and an acceptance of difference” which was important for them (F.G). They
realised that by the very act of sharing, they learned there were many ways of doing things: so many options, opinions and alternatives (F.G). For Pádraig, “the integration of the different areas” helped him to “think contextually and pastorally” (Q. 10). In the focus group Seán spoke of how the process of integration that took place in the seminar made him aware of the fact that “you are not on your own” (F.G). Because the focus of the seminar was quite specific, Seán saw that it helped a person to be more “focused on the issue at hand and be able to move from one situation to another . . . therefore reflection is required in order to process the events” (Q. 10).

For Ruth, the seminar was an opportunity to explore her role and identity in her ministry situation where she was struggling. She wondered if she was supposed to “fit in” to some role or did she have to establish it herself (F.G). Fiona talked about how she wondered if there was “a right answer or a right way of doing something” in ministry until she realized from the diversity of views that there were many ways of being a pastoral minister (F.G).

4.5 Toward an Operative Theology for Ministry

The data show that there were similar responses from the research participants on how they saw an “operative theology for ministry.” Fiona and Mark summed it up by saying that it is “an active dynamic, a theology that is born out of personal experience” . . . “something that informs words and actions in ministry” (Q. 13). Generally, my experience of ministry students has shown that the ability to distinguish between the influence of an embedded and deliberative theology in their lives or in their ministry is a
slow process. Ruth spoke of it being the real challenge when asked to address her theology for ministry. She saw herself as working out of “all” the tradition without any differentiation between those aspects that she personally lived and spoke about in a more focused way. It took her some time to be aware that she, in who she was as a person, and as a minister, reflected a particular image of God and understanding of theology (F.G). As the research participants reflected back on their experience of the seminar through the lens of their recent experiences of ministry, they acknowledged that their theology for ministry was constantly evolving. Fiona stated that:

> the whole experience of my ministry has challenged my understanding of God and it is challenged every day . . . But it (image of God) is always evolving and changing . . . how you move from one theology to another as well. One can seem very important to you, and then it can seem less important you know, but I would work largely out of an incarnational theology. Largely, he is very much with us. It is trying to keep the balance of [how] . . . he is also very transcendent, totally other, he is not just with us . . . trying to keep the scales balanced all the time. (F.G).

Fiona humbly acknowledged that the God with whom she began her ministry has “radically changed” from the God she experiences in her ministry at present (F.G).

Four of the participants noted how their image of God helped them to develop their theology for ministry (Q. 4 Closed). Mark struggled with how love, which is so vast, translated into real experience for him: “the fact that ‘love’ is at the centre means that any action we take, love can come into it and I would be very much inclusive in my ministry” (F.G). Ruth was aware that “before we even enter a situation, that wisdom and tradition are there and that we need to tap into and bridge it” (Q. 3). Fiona spoke of how the seminar made her aware of the need to ask in ministry “what kind of theology is this
person working out of? Is this an incarnational theology? Is God with them on a daily basis? Is this a creation God?” (F.G). Within this same context Ruth spoke of how difficult she also found it initially to identify different models of church (F.G).

When asked to give a phrase that best describes their operative theology for ministry most participants quoted Scripture. Fiona spoke of her theology being incarnational – God with us (Q. 14), while Ruth spoke of much “soul searching” before she came to a strong sense of God’s presence at work in her ministry, even in her inadequacy: “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor 12:9) (Q. 14). Pádraig spoke of theology for ministry in the context of relationships and a Trinitarian God. For him the great commandment of how “we love God, and neighbour and self” was the major theological direction in his ministry (F.G). This was not always the case but clarity has come through reflection so that “he has now learned to connect it within the whole relationship of the church and the different areas of ministry” (F.G). There was a tentativeness in Pádraig’s sharing as he was very aware of the need to respect the theology of others whom he met in ministry: “in some sense it is hard talking about God, God is so much bigger than our experience, the model we are working out of . . . to respect the models that others are working out of . . . not to box him up . . . maybe that is something I have learnt” (F.G).

The theology of ministry from which Mark operated was a “God as love” (F.G). This was his embedded theology which led him to a deeper sense of service in ministry. This image was a reminder, that love is not self-possessive, it is not just about what one is doing in ministry, but it is about being inclusive of others also; of listening to them. He
was also very aware that one can never actually exhaust the mystery of God (F.G). For Seán, the theology that influences his ministry is the mission of Jesus: “the spirit of the Lord is on me, for he has anointed me to bring the good news to the afflicted. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives, sight to the blind, to let the oppressed of free, to proclaim a year of favour from the Lord” (Q. 14). The research participants did not mention anything of their theology for ministry in the one-to-one interviews.

4.6 Ministerial Identity

When asked what they understood by ministerial identity, the responses from the research participants included phrases such as the following: “Who I am in ministry and how comfortable am I in this?” (Pádraig); “it includes all those characteristics and charism, natural and graced, that combine to make one unique” (Fiona); “qualities that make one more suitable for some ministries more than others” (Fiona); “being recognized as one who ministers and is comfortable in who one is and in what one is about” (Seán); “where you see yourself in ministry and how you see yourself in that role” (Mark) (Q. 16).

There was evidence of a struggle to find this ministerial identity among all the participants. For Ruth, ministerial identity “is not something you would [address] within the reflection group, within those few months . . . it is a habit over time . . . I think it is always something you grapple with” (F.G). She spoke of how she really struggled with her identity, which was also associated with a lack of clarity around her role in her placement at the time (F.G). The group sharing helped her to reach greater clarity in her ministerial identity: “I was grappling with this. I think they just encouraged me. Every
time I came back [to the group] and I presented a paper I was growing into the role. Having said that, it has taken until this day to become comfortable with that side of it” (F.G).

Fiona, when talking about the development of a ministerial identity said, “I was starting to stand there . . . but I was wobbly . . . I was just beginning the journey” (F.G). In her present ministry, she has a sense of being a chaplain, but this is something she believes is affirmed by others who see her in that role more easily than she sees herself as one. Within this context, Fiona also spoke of the interdisciplinary approach in her ministry which confirms her identity as a spiritual carer, among other carers: “I share it with the social workers, the psychologists, the nurses . . . we all do it together” (F.G).

Seán spoke of his embarrassment at wearing ashes, when, as a seminarian he was studying in a secular college. Yet his lay Catholic colleagues did not seem to be in the least bothered about it for him or themselves. Looking back he now identifies this experience with a “disconnect” in his Christian identity, something he has addressed in his present ministry situation and establishing a ministerial identity.

Fiona saw her operative theology for ministry as something “born out of personal experience; it is deeply rooted and flows first of all from my identity as a Christian. It is the foundation on which all else stands” (Q. 17). For Pádraig, his “operative theology for ministry” helped him to see his “personal relationship with God” and the “relationship between me and my neighbour all flowed from the love of God” (Q. 17). Having clarity about his theology helped Seán to be more comfortable with how he “engages with others and the fact that I truly believe in the Good News” (Q. 17). Mark wrote that “his theology
for ministry, namely ‘God as love’” is manifest in his “consideration of others’ stories and showing compassion when and where necessary” (Q. 17).

The participants confirmed that the goals that they had named for the theological reflection seminar contributed constructively to their sense of who they are in ministry, their ministerial identity (Q. 18). Fiona wrote about how the group had made her aware that she does not just represent herself but a “particular tradition [and] the integration of theory and practice has proved crucial” (Q. 18). She also saw how the group enabled the participants to “develop skills [which] helped build confidence and gave [them] the tools through which to communicate [their] experience of God” (Q. 18). Pádraig wrote of how the goals of the seminar were linked with getting to know God in life “whether it was through the exploration of theological questions or my image of God I was helped to grow in my ministry. I think that this exploration through reflection has given me a deep sense of identity in ministry” (Q. 18).

Seán spoke of how the seminar has contributed to an understanding of who he is in ministry because “all I do has to be grounded in an image of God and in Scripture and prayer. This in itself gives me the foundation required for ministry and affirms me in what I do. It gives an in-depth realisation that Jesus, throughout the Scriptures walked with people and met them where they were in their lives” (Q. 17). Ruth noted that one of her goals was to learn more about herself (Q. 18). The seminar has now led her to a “greater appreciation of (my) life experiences and has helped me in ministering to other people in an empathic and listening way” (Q. 18). Ruth now sees herself as a better communicator and “has more of an idea of the church and God” and this influences her
ministry. Most of all, she is now at ease with the fact that her understanding of both church and God are “constantly changing and evolving” (Q. 18). This was something she would not have been at ease with prior to being part of a theological reflection seminar.

The research participants differentiated between identity and identification through symbols such as the “collar” or a “badge,” which led to a differentiation between role and identity. While they were clear that they were always “a minister” they were also clear that, in their work identity, they needed to step out of this role at times. For Fiona this was as much about self-preservation as anything: I need to be able to step away sometimes and just be me. I need that space” (F.G). There are times when she does not want to talk about the state of the church. She is very aware from working in an institution that there are:

some people who embrace you, a few; some who accept you because you earn their respect; and a large [group] who have no time what-so-ever and think there has got to be something wrong with you. Representing something (like the church) . . . that is a huge challenge, no doubt about it. For me personally as it is for everybody (F.G).

Overall, there was some evidence from the research data that the theological reflection seminar helped indirectly the research participants to form and appropriate a ministerial identity. It is difficult, however, to assess how much it really helped them to appropriate this identity into their lives.
4.7  Group Theological Reflection in Ministry Formation and Ecclesial Ministry

None of the participants had experienced theological reflection as they knew it in the seminar since they left college. Fiona spoke of having some reflection time with a work colleague either at work or over the phone (F.G). However, her commitment at the moment is to supervision and that is as much as she can manage between a busy ministry and family commitments (F.G). Another spoke about being part of a reflection group with local ministry colleagues for a number of months but that it had since “fallen apart” (F.G). This had happened because of the difficulty in finding a time for a sufficient number of the group to meet regularly due to a busy and variable work schedule as well as other personal commitments. He now touches base on a one-to-one level with his peers in ministry in other parts of the country. Seán and Mark spoke of being part of a team in their ministry situation (F.G). This is very supportive for ministry, though it does not call for a deeper sharing of situations in ministry or of how individuals handle the reality of ministry today in the way that is possible in a theological reflection seminar. While such experiences were not as supportive as the seminar, they did provide an element of camaraderie among those engaged in ministry.

All the participants agreed that it would be valuable to be part of a theological reflection seminar in their present ministry situation. They named the difficulties they encounter to do this right now (Q. 24). These included: being busy in ministry; time constraints; suitable location; flexible working hours that do not coincide with people whom they may wish to share with; lack of communication and sharing of resources; difficulty in finding like-minded people whom one can trust (within travelling distance)
and who would be interested in sharing; family commitments and dynamics; and financial issues (Q. 24).

Mark regretted that there is no programme in place for “theological reflection groups in parishes” (I.M). In his interview, Mark said that one of the difficulties in having reflection groups as part of the life of a ministry team is that it is difficult to convey the information across to those responsible for parishes since they have no experience of it or sense the value (I.M). Mark also recognized that in a parish, things can be “a bit loose and unpredictable” unlike college, which has a more structured environment (Q. 23). The need for people in ministry to meet for theological reflection seemed all the more urgent given the present reality for ministry in Ireland. Mark spoke of ministry as being isolating at times: “it can be disquieting in the sense that I can be standing on shaking ground . . . the church is supposed to be the face of sanity and that has not happened” (I.M).

Fiona spoke in her interview of how she experiences a lot of anger “at the Catholic Church because it had the power and it controlled” (I.F). Seán, spoke of how “generally people are happy with the local church . . . on a local level, people like and love their local parish . . . when it comes to Rome and the global/universal church people do not want to hear about it” (I.S). Seán had difficulty with people who say that “they don’t want anything to do with it [the church] and they don’t believe in it, yet they go and present their child for baptism” (I.S). Ruth, while acknowledging that this is a hard and challenging time, tries to look at it in a positive light (I.R). Yet, because of what the church means to her, Ruth believed that “when the church is being attacked, I am being attacked” (I.R). Mark’s experience in ministry was that there is a huge feeling from the
community of having been “let down.” However, like the other research participants, he was positive in trying to see the present situation as an opportunity for growth (I.M).

In looking to the future of the theological reflection seminar in the Education for Ministry Programme, Ruth, affirming the reflections of the group, saw the theological reflection seminar as an “enriching” experience and “an integral part of the programme” (Q. 25). To help ensure that it continues to be so into the future the group made the following suggestions:

- participants would need some “more preparation before going into the group” (Q. 25);
- directors of Formation in the Seminary should not be group facilitators in the seminar (I.P);
- participants need to enter the seminar with a “positive rather than a negative attitude, because negativity breeds negativity and it is not helpful” to the group (I.P, Q. 25);
- two placement experiences, instead of one would give additional material for reflection because the group “shared so much in the verbatim . . . so much came out of that” (I.R);
- the programme needs to be spaced out over a longer period “more ideas germinate and grow stronger by the day” (I.M).

4.8 Conclusion

In this chapter I have described the experience of the theological reflection seminar as presented by the research participants in the focus group, the questionnaire and the one-
to-one interview. I addressed these experiences under the six themes that surfaced from the research. Most of the key points for each theme were addressed with data from the focus group and the questionnaire. The numbers of references to the interviews were fewer as most of the research participants had shared all they wished to say on the theological reflection seminar by the time these took place. By bringing the three sources together, however, as well as showing how more than one person experienced a particular theme, I believe that the research has addressed the research question: What is the role of the theological reflection seminar in the Education for Ecclesial Ministry programme?
Chapter Five

From Action to Insight

Not at the pointed hour of ecstasy nor at the furthest edge of being,
but here, in the even close-knit hours among the week-day goings-on of wind and weather,
here is our hidden threshold of perception,
here we must wait until the doors of the present swing open on new hinges.214

5.1 Introduction

At the heart of qualitative research “is the search for meaning and the process of interpretation.”215 Swinton and Mowat also remind us that the ways in which this meaning is sought and discovered vary as much as “the understanding of what interpretation is and the role it should perform within the research process.”216 The experience of each of the research participants in this project was unique. Yet, there are sufficient similarities among them to support the affirmation that the seminar does have a significant part to play in ministry formation. It is not that each of the participants’ experiences fit snugly together, rather their individual experiences can be likened to different plants in the garden, which taken together provide a nourishing meal at the table.

Acknowledging that human experience is inherently interpretative, this chapter brings both the theoretical framework that was proposed for theological reflection within ministry formation in Chapter Two and the data from the research outlined in Chapter Four into conversation. In the theoretical framework, I identified three main elements of the theological reflection process, especially within the theological reflection seminar,

215 Swinton and Mowat, Practical Theology and Qualitative Research,101.
216 Swinton and Mowat, Practical Theology and Qualitative Research,101.
that in my experience facilitate the formation and appropriation of a ministerial identity. These were:

- the establishment of clear goals and a practical process of procedure for the theological reflection seminar;
- the integration of the human, spiritual, academic and pastoral dimensions of the formation programme;
- the articulation of an operative theology for ministry.

Taken together, I believe, these provide a foundation on which it is possible to form and appropriate a ministerial identity.

In Chapter Four, the main themes that emerged from the research were not dissimilar to those areas outlined in the theoretical framework. These themes affirmed my belief that initial and continued growth in practical theology takes place through personal and group reflection; genuine dialogue on “ministry texts;” and by being accountable to one’s peers in ministry. Paulo Freire writes about the paradoxical “push and pull” of reflective practice which teaches students to “know better what they already know and . . . teach them what they don’t know yet.”

5.2 The Ideal and the Reality

The overall experience of the five research participants of the theological reflection seminar, even taking into account the many challenges it posed, was that it was a positive and formative experience for ministry at a personal and professional level (F.G. 71-73).

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The research data confirm Killen and de Beer’s assertion that theological reflection can be experienced as “the discipline of exploring individual and corporate experience in conversation with the wisdom of a religious heritage.” \(^{218}\) Participation in the theological reflection seminar while in formation establishes the “habit” of reflection and introduces the students, who are not by nature reflective, to a methodology for reflection in and on ministry that they can utilize in the future (I.P). The group called the research participants to move beyond their “comfort zone” and address questions of “why,” “what,” and “who” in their ministerial formation. The research demonstrated that, when a conversation is a genuine dialogue, a space for openness is created that seeks to hear from beliefs, actions, and perspectives – one’s own and those of others – as well as those of the tradition. The very act of writing about and presenting a ministry situation to the group called the students to slow down, take time, and reflect upon what was happening as they looked back on their pastoral actions: “I learned how to put down my situations on paper and explain them step by step” (Ruth Q. 7); “this act in itself pushes us to be more reflective in order to see where God is in this situation and how this may affect our lives” (Seán Q. 7); “it gave me the opportunity to verbalise what I was feeling” (Pádraig Q. 7).

Reflection was not new to the research participants, but the methodology of the seminar opened up new ways of approaching complicated and “ill-structured” situations – an argument presented by Schön. \(^{219}\) The participants affirmed that theological reflection, therefore, “may confirm, challenge, clarify, and expand how we understand our own experience and how we understand the religious tradition. The outcome is new

\[^{218}\text{Killen and de Beer, }\textit{The Art of Theological Reflection}, \text{ viii. }\text{ See also Chapter One (1.1).}\]

\[^{219}\text{Schön, }\textit{The Reflective Practitioner}, 49-69, 276-278.\]
truth and meaning for living.” For Fiona the seminar was the place where the theology she had studied at undergraduate level was integrated into the reality of life: “this is where it is meeting; this is now making sense” (F.G). Seán saw the seminar as the place it all “comes together” (I.S) while Ruth spoke of narrative healing (F.G).

It was the dialogical nature of theological reflection, which opened them to the work of the Spirit, which then allowed for growth and conversion: “there is some key, there is something that can push you forward: personally, professionally and pastorally;” (Ruth F.G); “it is about getting to know yourself better . . . to lift you out of your comfort zone” (Pádraig F.G). Participants learnt that ministry did not simply involve applying previous knowledge of God to a pastoral reality or vice versa. Rather, it was this connectedness between theology and experience that make “theological reflection” so critical to practical theology since whenever we express our faith, we are also making a theological statement. Ruth spoke of how the seminar “is a personal journey . . . it opens up your idea of faith and you have to apply academic theology to it” (Q. 9), while Mark identified how it challenged his preconceptions (Q. 9). The seminar deepened the skill of reflection itself. It helped the participants to “pull together” a broad range of previous thinking, knowledge and experience. Pádraig was very clear that he would not be reflective by nature, so the seminar enabled him to be more reflective and thus more effective in his ministry by providing a model for reflection (I.P).

Looking back on their experience of the seminar, the research participants recognized how much it prepared them for ministry through confronting their own

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220 Killen and de Beer, *The Art of Theological Reflection*, 51. See also Chapter Two (2.1.3).
221 Margaret Lavin, *Theology for Ministry*, 12.
personality and spirituality (Q. 10, 11 and 12). Ruth spoke of how the seminar made her realise that “there is really much more in this. You can go really deep with this if you want to, and always there is something you are searching for in the experience” (F.G). They learned in the group how to connect these personal dimensions with both their theological studies and with their ministerial practice. Sharing and reflecting in a disciplined and methodical manner that addresses human, spiritual, academic and pastoral issues at the level required by the seminar was challenging. In today’s “noisy” and technological society, communication through text messaging and e-mail is often impersonal and controlled. There are fewer opportunities to share with work colleagues at depth or to be in a space where critique can be given in a holistic and affirmative environment. Because of this, the research participants spoke of the need for time to be given to the initial steps of group-formation and sharing. This is critical if the seminar is to achieve its goals as participants need “more preparation before going into the group” (Q. 25).

Naming and articulating a theology for ministry was difficult for the research participants as students since they wanted to work out of “all” the tradition. They acknowledged that the seminar helped them to address this difficulty by connecting their practice with their faith journey, their own embedded theology, and with their academic studies. Pádraig was aware that “in some sense it is hard talking about God, God is so much bigger than our experience, the model we are working out of . . . to respect the models that others are working out of . . . not to box him up . . . maybe that is something I have learnt” (F.G). The seminar was vital in unlocking learning and re-engaging them
as students with the theological theory for pastoral practice. The seminar was not one “tidy” or “complete” event in the ministry formation but part of an organic process that is still calling for integration of different elements of the lives of the research participants. These elements “are intertwined in all situations and they only appear to be recognised through reflection” (Seán Q. 9).

Each research participant struggled in her or his own way with the question of identity. For them, Christian identity was a given, but the formation and appropriation of ministerial identity was much more elusive. Their immediate concern as students centred more on their role and job description. Fiona, Ruth and Seán were helped to clarify their job description and work requirements through group sharing. The research participants saw the formation of a ministerial identity as a process – a by-product of their experience of ministry – rather than something they set out to achieve. Fiona spoke of how she was “starting to stand there . . . I was wobbly . . . I was just beginning the journey” (F.G). The process of forming a ministerial identity was begun and “the seeds were planted” in the theological reflection seminar. The seminar was a place where they, as students, received support and affirmation: the external confirmation of the beginnings of their identity formation. The seminar contributed to a later formation of an internal sense of their identity in ministry. Now that they look back, they realize that their identity as pastoral ministers was sometimes recognized by others before they saw it in themselves. Fiona spoke of how “somebody else could see strengths that I had that I did [not see]” (F.G).
The level of resistance that was experienced by the participants, at both a personal and group level, was a reminder of how difficult it is to take time for reflection and to actually do so within a group context (F.G). The research participants identified the resistance coming from various sources such as:

- personality type (Seán F.G);
- the inability or unwillingness to share (Fiona F.G);
- limited language for experiences (Ruth F.G);
- lack of trust (Mark F.G);
- moved out of a comfort zone (Pádraig F.G);
- interruption of progress in formation (Mark F.G).

Mark questioned whether the seminar was academic enough. Others asked if it was another academic exercise, abstract and complex and not relevant to the “real” work of ministry. These “resisting” factors were not inconsistent with those outlined in Chapter Two and highlighted the need for student ministers to experience theological reflection with other practitioners in order to see the value of the process. As noted in Chapter Two, until recently, many practitioners in ministry believed that they did “not have an obligation to undertake regular reflection because they do not see themselves as having professional obligations.”222 This was challenged by Mark who spoke of how the group interaction called him to be more “disciplined and accountable” in his ministry. The necessity to be accountable engendered greater responsibility to himself, to the other group participants, and the people with whom he ministered. As ministers are being

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222 See Chapter Two (2.1.6).
called to greater transparency in their work, they also need support structures like the theological reflection seminar to help them achieve the balance between confidentiality and openness required today. No longer can the pastoral minister see reflection as an “unhealthy introversion which gets in the way of doing immediate, real and urgent things” or to say that she or he is “already doing enough praying and preparation for worship/ministry.”

While not unaware of the challenges of the seminar, the research participants saw them as invaluable tools to help them “develop personal, pastoral and profession skills . . . develop a reflective approach [to ministry] . . . accept people for who they are” (Q. 4). The process of theological reflection called them to probe a particular experience in a reflective and constructive manner, not just to re-live it. The reflection called them to look at a situation from a theological, social and cultural perspective. With the support of the group they addressed their own personal thoughts and feelings on the situation. The seminar was a safe and trusting environment where students could explore their own inner journey with their peers. Sharing – the question of – the practical side of their ministry, the actions they had taken and the reasons for them were clarified through the critique of others. The research participants came to appreciate the value of open dialogue and the considered opinions of others. Most of all, the realization that there were many ways to respond to any given situation gave them personal freedom and reduced the fear of failure or of being found inadequate. The seminar was not one “tidy” or “complete”

223 Some of these come from my own experience of theological reflection groups and others were suggested by Stephen Pattison, Groping Towards a Definition, www.biapt.org.uk/whatpreventstr, accessed July 5, 2006. See also Chapter Two (2.1.7).
part of the ministry formation but part of a process that is still on-going for the research participants. Sharing and reflecting in a disciplined and methodical manner, at the level required by the seminar, was challenging but rewarding for all the research participants.

5.3 Goals and Process

All the research participants appreciated the value of the seminar because it gave them a model for reflection on complex, multilayered, unpredictable situations or issues. The process provided a disciplined approach to reflection where they could explore such issues in a “safe environment.” While facing their own personal fears and faith journey, they learned to be open to a number of possible responses, often presented in a new light by their peers in the group.

The research participants found that theological reflection was more than preparing, presenting and discussing a ministerial incident. It was also a movement from individual reflection to group reflection and back to individual reflection. The four main movements of theological reflection as presented by Killen and de Beer were significant at different levels for the research participants. By having to address an experience in a group, the participants confirmed for themselves the value of publicly naming different issues involved in a situation. It “focuses people on their image of God” and “explores theological questions” (Q. 4). While the research participants did not specifically name the different elements of the reflection model, they were aware of the journey from identifying the reality of ministry, to focusing on the heart of the matter. They learnt how

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224 Killen and de Beer, *The Art of Theological Reflection*, 68-69. See also Chapter Two (2.1.6).
to name the influence of their own personhood, the culture, ecclesiology and theology that were active in a situation. This in turn led them towards a new insight and action in order to “give meaningful interpretations to practical experiences in ministry” (Q. 4).

The seminar helped the research participants to “unpack” situations and identify the real “heart of the matter;” name influences they had not seen; and to identify a variety of alternative approaches which they had not considered, as they prepared their individual presentations of a ministry situation. The dialogical nature of the seminar with “openness to the work of the Spirit,” led to growth and conversion within them. Through their analysis the research participants found their “voice” in order to focus on what might be created and imagined in their placements.

The goals presented by the participants echo Killen and de Beer’s belief that a compelling drive for meaning could be a motivation for theological reflection. For Mark, the aim of the seminar was to give a “meaningful interpretation to practical experiences in ministry and provide a systematic method of evaluation” (Q. 4). He also affirmed that the seminar, which aims to instil discipline and allow for critical analysis of material available, had achieved its purpose. This echoed the first goal for the seminar as presented in Chapter Two: to provide a method in which to process everyday pastoral experiences and to deal with the major questions of life as well as the minutiae of everyday observations; situations that both trouble or affirm ecclesial ministry.225

For Fiona, Mark and Seán the goal of the seminar was to achieve some level of integration between theory and practice. The seminar, with the help of others, helped

225 See Chapter Two (2.1.3).
them to explore the theoretical foundation for practice. This is similar to the goal presented in the theoretical framework, namely: to achieve a level of integration between theory and practice; thoughts and feelings; and the “what” and “who” of ministry. This integration aims to lead the participant towards intellectual, spiritual, human and pastoral growth as it helps to ensure that all four areas of the formation programme are interacting with each other.  

The research participants spoke consistently of how the seminar aimed to enable students to explore theological questions and see how experience related to their image of God and church. They spoke of how it facilitates the naming and articulating of a theology for ministry. This affirms Collins’ argument that one of the purposes of the theological reflection seminar is to “discern one’s own operative theology for ministry.” It is also inclusive of the aim of the programme: to enable students to access prior learning and to draw on human resources, personal faith, academic theology and pastoral experiences in order to articulate an operative theology for ministry.

The question of the formation and appropriation of a ministerial identity was the goal that the participants struggled with in both their pastoral placement and in the seminar. Ruth, Fiona and Seán noted how the group helped them question their role and job description. All agreed, however, that the seminar facilitated the journey towards forming and appropriating an identity: the seedlings of growth were at least present. This is possibly as much as the initial formation can achieve since it is the pastoral

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226 See Chapter Two (2.1.3).
227 Collins, *Models of Theological Reflection*, 93, 95. See also Chapter Two (2.1.3).
228 See Chapter Two (2.1.3).
practice which the research participants have had since graduation that has helped them to deep their ministerial identity.

This may have been what Warren, Murray and Best were reminding us of when they noted that the people engaged in theological reflection seek not only to grasp truth more deeply, but also to be more deeply grasped by truth. Theological reflection facilitated the possibility of establishing an identity or transforming the participants’ response to a situation that might have facilitated the formation of an identity. The participants in the seminar were primarily action-orientated, and so, bringing about a review of their decisions and the actions was a primary concern. The formation of a ministerial identity was secondary to this. Other goals that were mentioned by the research participants were associated with personal development and the development of social, professional, leadership and communication skills. The support, solidarity and the critique of the group, which helped affirm them in their ministry and reduced the sense of isolation, was central for all the research participants.

Components in the seminar such as learning how to write a verbatim and the means of presenting issues were all challenged and refined by the questions of the group (Q. 6 and 7). These elements emerged as significant learning tools for ministry formation. By writing, naming and placing issues in the open, there was a new realization that there were many points of view to be considered in a pastoral reality. Writing reflectively on a pastoral situation is a vital source of unearthing what is “going on” above and beneath the surface. This unlocks a potential to move towards a deeper, more integrated and honest

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229 Warren, Murray and Best, “The Discipline and Habit of Theological Reflection,” 324. See also Chapter Two (2.2.1).
form of theological learning. The research participants were clear that when writing about their experiences, they were also writing about themselves, reflecting their human, spiritual, and theological understanding of a pastoral reality. They learnt to critique and be open to the suggestions of others through group interaction: “to accept people for who they are” (Q. 4). In particular the participants acknowledged the value of being open to their own emotions, and those of others in ministry, since it was often this dimension that was blocking their effectiveness in ministry. They learnt to identify what were “stirring up” feelings at particular times (F.G).

With the help of the group members, who had a similar commitment to ministry, the research participants came to engage with the facts of a situation in a creative and constructive manner. They saw how to exercise basic supervision skills necessary to establish and maintain a monitoring system as a peer-reflection group. They also addressed the need to establish the theology that was active in the pastoral reality. They were able to articulate a theological stance that was cognizant of Scripture, church teaching and the cultural reality in which they operated. At the same time, they were helped on how to address the deep eschatological tension within Christian anthropology today.

The research participants were clear that they needed to experience trust in the group as good relationships are an integral part of ministry. Sharing one’s ministry places the minister in a vulnerable position and requires both trust and confidentiality from the group members (I.S). This openness and respect for difference were essential to engendering a learning environment that would be conducive to personal transformation
and growth. It may be that human connection, honesty, personal relationships and a sense of communication made cooperative action possible within the group. The sharing of human stories through reflection on experience happened more readily when trust existed among the group as well as openness to a level of reciprocity. When the research participants experienced that the group members were really listening and that it was a “safe place,” they were willing to share feelings, experiences and memories. In this environment of mutual interaction, and trust once they know that the “place is safe” transformation was possible (I.P).

The role of the facilitator is “to facilitate,” “educate for the process,” and “offer a supportive presence” (Q. 8). By doing this she or he can offer a genuine, theological, learning environment. There is power and authority in the role of the facilitator which can enable the students to pose questions or suggestions that stimulate ideas and knowledge as well as “challenge assumptions and agendas that may inhibit group learning” (Q. 8). The research participants were clear that the facilitator should not get in the way of the work of the group but rather, help them to move through the various stages: focus on the experience; identify the feelings and images; explore the “heart of the matter;” and identify new truths for action. The facilitator needed to be in touch with the dynamics of the group and to be aware of the unspoken agenda that operated “below the radar” (Q. 8).

Today information technology and virtual meeting places are sometimes seen as cost-effective alternatives to real time and space meeting places. Yet the research

\[230\] See Chapter Two (2.1.6).
participants affirmed that it is the conversation that takes place “face-to-face” that opens a depth of knowing about each other. This core condition for the establishment of good relationships is the basis for personal transformation, community, and therefore, possible social change. The participants became more aware, through group interaction, that it was through this quality of “intimate talking” and not just in “informational exchanges” that “the knowing” necessary to support human relationships is developed, and the wisdom found for transformational action in ministry. Mark affirmed that the practical theologian attends to the social context of human living and to the systems and structures which impinge on that living, because it is from here that the wisdom for action will emerge. (F.G).

5.4 Integration

Integration presumes that there is permeability between knowledge, spirituality and identity. It presumes that there is openness, no matter how minimal, to new ideas and possibilities in order to make room for change and transformation. The research findings highlighted how the seminar helped all five participants to be reflective in their ministry (I. P and Q. 4). This affirmed Van der Ven’s proposal that education needs to focus on forming the minister to be a “reflective practitioner.”231 The research participants established that the theological reflection seminar called them to be more reflective in and on ministry. Mark experienced it as a means of integrating the different dimensions of the programme and so making it a valuable tool to conceive of ministry as a reflective

231 Van der Ven, Education for Reflective Ministry, 136. See also Chapter Two (2.1.2).
practice (F.G). The seminar called the research participants not just to make connections between belief and practice, but also to bridge any divisions that may exist to and see both as one theological experience. This in turn influenced, or was influenced by, the human and spiritual growth that was going on within the participants “as it heightened self-awareness and altered attitudes which improved” (Q. 9).

Ruth spoke of how human emotions, such as anger and fragility, surfaced in the group sharing. The seminar helped her to see that these are agents of her formation. Seán and Pádraig came to see how their own humanity and the humanity of others needed to be addressed if they were to identify the real areas of concern that often lay beneath the situation under discussion. The goals of the seminar helped Seán to see that feelings are an integral part of ministry and need to be considered when sharing the words of Scripture and the doctrines of the church. It helped him to be more effective in ministry.

In terms of spiritual development, the evidence varied on how the participants integrated spirituality into their lives so as to have “the mind of Christ Jesus” (Phil 2:5) in their approach to ministry. Pádraig spoke of being called by God, that the work he did was God’s work and that the perception of God in the world could not be “boxed.” The change from purely academic study to a combination of both pastoral practice and interactive lectures within the ministry programme constituted a challenge for the research participants. Mark spoke of how the study and formation that he had experienced prior to the seminar did not encourage reflection. He was at ease with the academic/lecture style of teaching and learning as it suited his ordered approach to life, but questioned the apparent “disorder” of the theological reflection seminar. While this
attitude was voiced strongly by just one person, he was, it seemed to me, voicing an attitude that is embedded in many of his co-workers. Being part of a group challenged Mark to be accountable and responsible for his actions in a public way – something not required in class. Also the research participants realized that there were many ways to do theology and not just the one way they had thought of initially. The seminar opened up the different issues, often covert, that were inherent in ministry situations. In this scenario the participants were able to learn from each other and from the different elements of the programme.

The pastoral reality of the research participants changed how they perceived their academic studies and the role of Scripture and tradition in their practice. Through group theological reflection they came to a new appreciation of these as a source of knowledge and wisdom for the issues they addressed in their placements. Keeping this connection between academic theology and pastoral ministry was one of the main challenges faced by the programme. After a period of academic studies, Fiona expressed the feeling that her knowledge of theology was very much in her head: “I did not actually feel informed, I felt no sense of growth or liberation” (F.G). Fiona needed something that would bridge the gap between her studies with the pastoral reality she encountered. Integration entails “creating movement back and forth between the general and the particular, the historic and the present, the systematic and the ethical, to the concrete and local.”

For Fiona and Mark there was an initial concern over the extent of the pastoral dimension of the theological reflection seminar: “What has it got to do with real life?”

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Students come to the Education for Ecclesial Ministry programme with a wide variety of experiences and learning styles. In such formation situations, Cahalan sees it necessary that students be able to integrate “Scripture, theology, history and ministerial resources in an analysis of a contemporary situation.” She bases her work on the premises that ministers are leaders, theologians and interpreters of sacred texts, traditions and human experiences:

To be effective leaders, ministers need both a breadth and depth of knowledge about the Christian faith as well as insight into living the faith in particular cultural and historical contexts. What are essential, then are both what a minister knows about the good news, its various expressions in Scripture and tradition, and how that knowledge informs and shapes teaching, preaching, worship, social ministries and the care of souls in particular ecclesial settings.

The strength of the seminar for Seán was that it was a leveller for a group of people with various learning styles. It accommodated and challenged the participants who were more academically orientated, as well as the people who are more intuitive or who naturally take a relational approach to ministry (I.S).

The data from Ruth, Fiona and Mark confirmed Warren, Murray and Best’s argument that “instruction and practice in theological reflection as a formal part of the curriculum provides a way (for chaplains, students in Clinical and Pastoral Education, and other pastoral caregivers) to integrate ‘book learning’ with clinical experience, and

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that it encourages them to mine and explore the rich veins of religious tradition accessible through continued study.235

The ministry formation programme aims is to make integration both a strategy and a process. While total integration was elusive each of the research participants gave evidence to show that the theological reflection seminar did make possible a “general and integral process of constant growth, deepening each aspect of formation – human, spiritual, intellectual and pastoral – as well as ensuring their active and harmonious integration, based on pastoral charity and in reference to it.”236

5.5 Developing an Operative Theology for Ministry

Christian identity is about placing Jesus as the primary reference point of what it means to be a human in relation to God, to other people and to creation. As outlined in Chapter Two, in a Trinitarian community, we are called to maintain relationship of loving communion: God to us, us to God and us to each other.237 This emphasis aims to help the students to see that as ecclesial ministers they form and appropriate their ministerial identity in relationship with the Word made flesh and through him with a Trinitarian God. This relationship is reflected in and reflective of the community of all God’s people, in service to each other. This service is a response to the thirst of Christ form the Cross “I am thirsty” (Jn 19:28).

235 Warren, Murray and Best, “The Discipline and Habit of Theological Reflection,” 324. See also Chapter Two (2. 2.2).
236 John Paul II, I will Give You Shepherds (Pastores Dabo Vobis), 71.
237 See Chapter Two (2.3.1).
Firstly, this relational and service element of theology was expressed by the research participants through Scripture references. They spoke of God in such diverse terms as: an incarnational God (Fiona); God as love (Mark); and a God who is present in weakness (Ruth). Pádraig spoke of his theology as being focused on the relational dimension of God that is expressed in the Trinity and the great commandment to love (F.G). This relationship influenced him in how he related to people in ministry and echoed LaCugna’s call “to seek out the deepest possible communion and friendship with every last creature, and if through the doctrine of the Trinity we do our best to articulate the mystery of God for us, then preaching and pastoral practice will fit naturally with the particulars of the Christian life.”

Pádraig had a deep sense of being part of a Christian community where his desire to live the great commandment was the theological focus of his life (F.G).

This call to service was also integral to Mark’s theology which was grounded in “God as love.” For him, ministry was not possessive because “love is not possessive” (F.G). Ministry is not one’s “personal property” [we must] allow others to fully enter into it . . . we are journeying together” (F.G). Love in service recognizes the uniqueness and difference of each person’s gifts while uniting all in the power of the Spirit to live the purpose for which they have been created “to praise, reverence, and serve God our Lord.” In addition to this, being part of the mission of God gives a sense of service (F.G). Seán expressed the reference of the mission of Christ as presented in Luke’s gospel as a theological influence on his work. He believed he was called and was drawn

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238 LaCugna, God for Us, 411. See also Chapter Two (2. 3. 3).
239 Puhl, The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius no. 23. See also Chapter Two (2. 3. 3).
to the way Christ presented the “why” of mission side by side with the “what” of ministry in chapter four of Luke’s gospel. This for him pointed to his identity and theology for mission and ministry. It provided a framework for reflecting on the “nature of the human person, on the relationship between human kind and all creatures of the earth, the relationship between ourselves and God.”

Ruth spoke of God’s presence in her ministry, especially in her weakness or in times of difficulty (Q. 14). For her, God was saying: “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor 12:9). St Paul believes that “human weakness is not a thing to be tolerated, but an essential ingredient of his Christianity.”

For Fiona, theology was centred on an incarnational God who is very much present and yet transcendent (Q. 14). The challenge for her was to keep both in balance.

Secondly, the research revealed that in order to give a theological meaning to life experiences, it was necessary for the participants to be familiar with Gospel stories. Just as Jesus opened the eyes of those whom he healed we need him to open our eyes today. Both Fiona and Ruth acknowledged how their image of God has been transformed through their ministry experience. Fiona spoke of how, since leaving College, ministry had challenged her “understanding of God and it is challenged every day” (F.G). She was very chastened by the fact that the God with whom she began her ministry had “radically changed” for her (F.G). Discerning hearts are formed through the dialogue of human experience, by the Word of God in prayer, and reflection. A process of discernment grows in communion with others, especially through a group reflecting together.

LaCugna, *God for Us*, 380. See also Chapter Two (2. 3. 3).
Paver, *Theological Reflection and Education for Ministry*, 75.
research participants were aware that the ability to give new meaning to life experience was not just the result of “using” Scripture as needed, in times of crisis, nor of occasionally applying it to pastorally situation; it was about a life nourished by the Word, reflection and prayer (Q. 15). Fiona acknowledged that it was through “observing the diversity of views and perspectives” of others that she became aware of her own (Q. 15). Ruth realized that it was through the group that she could often see who she was “in ministry and what theology [she] was operating out of” (Q. 15). It is in the context of an openness to learning from others that it is possible to experience St Paul’s call for a new way of seeing: “let the renewing of your minds transform you, so that you may discern for yourselves what is the will of God – what is good acceptable and perfect” (Rom 12:2).

Thirdly, by articulating their own operative theology for ministry, the research participants confirmed that the seminar helped them not just be a friend to those with whom they ministered, but also to be a local “missionary theologian.” Such a person is one who can interpret the present in the light of God’s revelation, understanding both the wisdom of the tradition and the hopes and fears of the local community (Q. 13). Van der Ven reminds us that theology learned only from a textbook will be of less use than a cycle of theological reflection.\(^{242}\) In the twenty-first century, knowledge of God may not be assumed and the language and vocabulary of the church is not always familiar, even to many Christians. Theological reflection enabled the participants to speak of their

\(^{242}\) Van der Ven, *Education for Reflective Ministry*, 119.
relationship with God, and more crucially, they learned how to explain it to those around them.

The research participants struggled with issues of embedded and deliberative theology as they wanted to claim the whole tradition, rather than identify how they interpreted and lived particular elements of theology in their own lives. The group helped Fiona to see that theology for ministry was “an active dynamic, a theology that is born out of person experience” (Q. 13). For Mark the theology informs his “actions and words in ministry” (Q. 13). By naming their own operative theology, they were enabled to become evangelists and leaders.

One of the central questions that emerged for the researcher was whether students have enough self-awareness and reflexivity to understand their own commitment to a body of knowledge in order to differentiate between the areas which are social constructs (practices that have evolved over time and more culturally biased) and those which require a more critical theological position (practices that carry core theological issues). Some had initially thought that there was one way to be a minister and if they grasped this, that they would be well on the road. For most of the participants it was the group sharing in the theological reflection seminar that helped them to dissipate this myth. Pádraig and Seán spoke of not wanting to “box” God or exhaust the mystery of God, but tried to be open to how God revealed God-self in ministry.

Finally, the changing cultural and ecclesiological reality in ministry has placed several different models of church before the research participants. As students, the participants had an initial perception that they had to know all the church’s teachings and
were required to apply them in their ministry regardless of the cultural or pastoral reality that faced them. They realized that until they could identify, at least in a general way, the theology or ecclesiology they or the care seeker was working from, they could not address the situations in an honest way. Today, multiple ecclesiologies necessitate a changing understanding of ministry and ministerial identity.\textsuperscript{243} While the research participants had begun to identify the reality of several different models of church, they were far from articulating an explicit ecclesiology that grounds their ministry. The absence of a particular articulated ecclesiology does not necessarily mean the absence of any ecclesiology, since any movement towards a ministerial identity presupposes some form of ecclesiology. As has already been noted, if ministry is connected with a special concern for the preservation of the Christian identity of the community, then “those who claim a ministerial identity must also claim some identification with the Christian Community.”\textsuperscript{244} The absence of an articulated ecclesiology may in itself be part of the struggle experienced by the research participants to come to a clearer sense of ministerial identity. The diversity of theological and ecclesiological models for ministry that exist in today’s Church, is reflective in the changing cultural reality in Ireland today.\textsuperscript{245}

### 5.6 Forming and Appropriating a Ministerial Identity

In relation to forming and appropriating a ministerial identity, the greatest value of the seminar was to provide a context and a creative environment to explore areas that were

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\textsuperscript{243} Avery Dulles, \textit{Models of Church} (New York: Doubleday, 2002).
\textsuperscript{244} Edward Schillebeeckx, \textit{Ministry, Leadership in the Community of Jesus Christ} (New York: Crossroads, 1986), 24.
\textsuperscript{245} See Chapter 1 (1.2).
an integral part of role and identity in ministry. What it also did was provide time, an environment and a group of like-minded people for reflection on issues that were part of identity formation. Ruth did not see it as “something you would [address] within the reflection group within in those few months . . . it is a habit over time” (F.G). For Fiona the seminar provided the soil in which “the seeds were planted” for the growth of a ministerial identity, because at the time it was not obvious to them as students that this was actually taking place. When identity was indirectly acknowledged, it was affirming the areas addressed in Chapter Two. The research participants had negotiated a position between their own sense of self, their Christian identity and that required of them in ministry. These included: human identity, Christian Identity, ministerial identity and leadership in community.

Firstly, in terms of human identity, the research participants valued the seminar as a place where they got to know themselves better and developed empathy for others. They came to understand the need to modify their initial approach to ministry. They grasped from others the need to navigate the gap between the ideal of the Christian message and the lived reality of people’s lives. Positive statements and the level of encouragement from the others in the group towards the person presenting helped them to be more tolerant of themselves (F.G). Sometimes, the person presenting a situation might have felt their response was inadequate, where others saw the good things that had been achieved. At other times, when they thought they had carried out an exercise really well, others pointed out a more relevant approach. This critique reflected and strengthened the
inner journey of identity formation for Seán, Mark and Ruth through the process of being “reflective practitioners.”

The group helped in reflecting the complex interplay of individual and community influences. This led to a greater sense of self that affirmed individuality in relationship with others. Qualities such as the vulnerability, inadequacy and brokenness of the minster were spoken of by the research participants. Paver asserts that “pastoral identity is enhanced when we stand with people offering them our vulnerability – not our strength.”

Awareness, as in Ruth’s case, of one’s weaknesses can mean that a person may allow herself to be empowered to receive what they need to be faithful to God’s call in their lives from God and from others. Alternatively, the minister can shrink back into her or his self, into isolation, where they are unable to receive from God or others. Or, as has happened in many cases of child sexual abuse, the minister tries to overcome his or her insecurity by a “will to power” and “transgress the limits of our creatureliness.”

Until there was clarity on this identity, it was difficult for the research participants to achieve an inner sense of themselves in ministry.

Secondly, in terms of Christian identity Seán, Ruth and Pádraig were clear that ministerial identity is built on a person’s human and Christian identity. Ministry is not just something you adopted for a day or a period of time. You are who you are in ministry, regardless of your identification by dress or actions. This reaffirmed Cahalan’s argument that pastoral ministers are disciples first and servants/leaders/ministers second,

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246 Paver, *Theological Reflection and Education for Ministry*, 76.
among disciples. The research participants had a certain sense of their own personal autonomy and who they were through the external relationships they had established in their ministry situation.

Thirdly, in terms of ministerial identity, the participants struggled with their role and their job description. The understanding of the term *ministerial identity* suggests that it can vary depending on the perspective from which it is viewed. If ministerial identity is viewed from the perspective of ministry, that is, from the perspective of the needs of the community which call for some response, then the understanding of ministerial identity appears to be much broader and more inclusive. If, on the other hand, ministerial identity is viewed from the perspective of the minister, and that which distinguishes an authentic minister from a social worker, then another, a faith perspective emerges.

The difficulty for ecclesial ministers is that the flow of intimacy is often one-way. They need to be part of the community, yet there are boundaries. The local community is the primary reference group and therefore the place of identity formation. It is the community that both compliments and strengthens the identity of the minister. Ministers need to maintain healthy relationships, yet there is a danger that they will be seen as aloof. The research participants were very conscious of boundaries and saw it as something to be carefully negotiated as they tried to establish their identity.

Cahalan addresses a long-standing divide between the personhood of the minister and her or his identity in ministerial practice. For her “discerning a vocation to ministry

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begins with discerning whether a person has the gifts for the practice as much as it is about discerning one’s state in life. Identity and practice are inextricably intertwined.”

Finally, the research participants were aware that role and identity come from their identity as leaders of disciples in the Christian community. Leadership of local communities is an encouragement to all church members to engage in Christian discipleship. The role and identity is generally given to ecclesial ministers by the congregation. Often this is to assist the congregation in fulfilling the role and identity to which it aspires – that of a counter-cultural and spiritual community. An ecclesial minister needs to be skilled in the art of building community solidarity; promoting collaboration and participation; and keeping hope alive – uplifting the human spirit within community. This in turn helps to form the identity of the minister. The seminar helped the research participants to see what they had achieved and how their identity might have been shaped by, or was shaping the decisions and actions being taken. The seminar was an opportunity for others to critique or affirm this identity as external observers.

While acknowledging the slow evolutionary sense of identity, the research participants were aware that it is something that others help to form through their affirmation of a person’s work in ministry. For Pádraig, “whether it was through the exploration of theological questions or my image of God, I was helped to grow in my ministry. I think that this exploration through reflection has given me a deep sense of identity in ministry” (Q. 18). Most spoke of the value of receiving some affirmation of

\[^{249}\text{Cahan, \textit{Introducing the Practice of Ministry}, viii.}\]
their attempts at theological reflection before reaching a level of comfort with the process in which the question of appropriating an identity could be addressed.

5.7 Ecclesial Ministry and Formation for Ministry

The limited experience of the research participants (between one and five years in ministry), of group theological reflection in their ministry since graduating from college was influenced by the busy nature and professional demands of ministry. While the research participants expressed a desire to engage in some form of group theological reflection with their companions in ministry, it was not built into their present time-table. For Mark there was a sense of disappointment and frustration at the lack of provision of opportunities for shared theological reflection in their day-to-day ministerial practice (I.M). The model of reflection that has been followed in college has been used by Mark to address specific situations in his present ministry. This confirms the argument presented by Whitehead and Whitehead that any model for reflection should be “portable, permeable and communal.”

In full-time ministry with a less structured environment, they appreciated the difficulty of finding time, space and companions for group theological reflection. There may, however, have also been an unwillingness to take personal responsibility for organising a reflection seminar, or indeed a lack to ministerial planning and prioritizing self care, but these were not addressed by the research participants.

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The skills that the research participants had learnt in the course of their initial formation and the hunger for reflective practice this had engendered in them simply had not been nourished in practice. Often this was because of the pressure of work and a lack of “protected” time for reflection. Frequently, this arose from the fact that these students had entered ministry with a larger supervision and reflective practice tool-kit than their colleagues who had been in ministry for some time. Mark spoke of the need to inform ministers, who have been in the field for some time and who have no experience of the value of group theological reflection, of the real value of the theological reflection seminar. Many of these long-established and “over-worked” practitioners neither see themselves as having professional obligations, nor could they see that group theological reflection would make any creative or positive difference to the way they do their work. Some people in ministry see theological reflection as an “alien demand,” “another damn thing,” which is neither life-nor ministry-enhancing.”

While the focus of the research was to identify the role of the theological reflection seminar in ministry formation at the time of the participants’ formation, I was also concerned to ascertain if sufficient foundations had been laid to form this identity for ministry in a church that seemed to have lost its direction and moral authority in the community. In the research interviews – the final part of the research – the researcher specifically asked if the present cultural situation in Ireland influenced or impinged on how they perceived their ministerial identity today. Fiona acknowledged that being a member of the Catholic Church at this time was challenging. She spoke of how some

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251 See Chapter Two (2.1.7).
people in her work situation were affirmative but for many there was a level of incredulity that anyone would want to be part of the church today. Inevitably this led to a level of self-protection of herself and her identity. The situation in which the church in Ireland finds itself today presents a challenge for all the research participants. Some see it as an opportunity for purification and growth, while others see the need to continually ground themselves in their relationship with God. Generally, as stated by Seán, there was a sense that the local Christian community was positively disposed towards their local ministry team, lukewarm towards the diocesan church and totally alienated from the central leadership of the church (I.S).

The research participants expressed a desire to see the theological reflection seminar continue as an integral part of ministry formation. Some of the suggestions for the theological reflection seminar in the formation for ministry programme, such as the need to have a facilitator other than a director of formation in the seminary, have already been implemented. Participation in the research awakened an awareness of the value of reflective practice and recreated a desire within the research participants to renew their efforts to form a reflective group in their present ministry situation.

The research participants affirmed in the interviews, the final part of the research, that by stating that the theological reflection seminar was not just valuable to them while in formation, but has proved invaluable as a model of reflection now that they are engaged in full-time ministry in the church. Unfortunately, participation in a regular theological reflection seminar tends to end with the close of initial formation. The demands of ministry, the reduced number of ministers and the changes in society outlined
in Chapter One, leave the researcher with a concern for the long-term sustainability of commitment to ecclesial ministry for people entering the field today (F.G). Being busy and isolation can lead to burn-out and inappropriate dependencies. Fiona wrote of how ministers “can become isolated and burdened” and so group theological reflection “offers solidarity” (Q. 5). In particular, unless there is a deep sense of mission, of time for prayer, reflection and peer and group support through team meetings, collaboration and theological reflection seminars, then ministers will find themselves alone and isolated.

5.8 Assumptions Operative in the Research

The first three assumptions about the theological reflection seminar (namely: that a disciplined methodology is necessary for theological reflection; that the theological reflection seminar facilitates the integration of the four main dimensions of the programme; and enables students to name and articulate a theology for ministry), were validated by the research. There was less clarity on the fourth assumption; namely, that by fulfilling the first three assumptions, the seminar facilitates the formation and appropriation of a ministerial identity. What did emerge was that it helped plant the seeds for the growth of a ministerial identity.

Firstly, the value of reflection, both personal and communal, as a central part of the ministry programme was affirmed by all five participants. The research participants gave evidence that while they struggled with the group element of the seminar, with writing and presenting a paper, the seminar did in fact help them to be more disciplined, methodical and accountable in their reflection in and on ministry. The interaction and
accountability required by group participation affirmed the need for community and collaboration in ministry. The discipline of being part of a group meant that they were stretched in their thoughts, words and actions since their approach to reflection did not come naturally and required guidance, methodology and praxis. Reflection within a group mirrored the reality of ministry as a communal experience. As well as providing an additional communal dimension to reflection on ministry, the group gave an element of peer supervision.

Secondly, the seminar did call on students to integrate the human, spiritual, theological and pastoral dimensions of the learning experiences within the formation programme. Theological reflection helps those who engage in it “to make sense of their world” through the disciplined and creative exercise of the theological imagination – by questioning, constructing, critiquing, speaking, and writing in the conceptual language of theology – through a conversation between experience and tradition. Once the research participants could differentiate between the embedded and deliberative theologies in their own lives and in the lives of the care-seeker, they were led through a process of integration of both who one is and what one believes in “doing” theology. All the participants agreed that they came to see academic studies and pastoral theology as two sides of the same coin, both are integral to the one theological enterprise.

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252 John Paul II, I Will Give you Shepherds (Pastores Dabo Vobis); Van der Ven, Education for Reflective Ministry, and Killen and de Beer, The Art of Theological Reflection.
253 Kolb, Experiential Learning as the Science of Learning and Development, and Duminuco, Ignatian Pedagogy: A Practical Approach.
Thirdly, having to connect their pastoral practice with theology and the wisdom of tradition, the research participants were very clear that they had been called to a deeper understanding of God’s place in their own faith journey and in their ministry. The uniqueness of each person, as modelled within the community of the Trinity, the presence of God as love, incarnate in Christ Jesus was a guiding light.

Fourthly, the theological reflection process helped the research participants, when they were students, to begin the process of forming a ministerial identity. None could say, however, that they appropriated it fully at that time. Because they developed a theology for ministry, this did not necessarily mean that they also developed a clear identity of themselves as ecclesial ministers. The seminar did reduce the sense of isolation in ministry and the presumption that there was one perfect or right identity in ministry. It opened up awareness in students that there are several ways to approach ministry and that each one has to make her or his own path by walking it.

What clearly emerged from the research was that practical theology is a reflective and an interpretative enterprise within which “divine revelation is interpreted by human beings who are fallen, contextually bound and has [have] a variety of different personal and faith agendas.”²⁵⁴ For ecclesial ministers, theology has a priority, yet the way in which revelation is interpreted, embodied and worked out in a pastoral reality is deeply influenced by specific contexts, individual and communal histories and one’s understanding of her or his faith tradition. It is these very contexts which in turn influence the practices of ecclesial ministers and their fidelity to God’s word.

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²⁵⁴ Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, 89.
5.8 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have shown how the theological reflection seminar was a critical part of the programme and an important locus in the research participants’ journey towards integrating the main dimensions of the programme and articulating an operative theology for ministry. It was significant, but less critical, in the formation of a ministerial identity. I have demonstrated how the seminar offered a shared context for critique and reconstruction of theologically-informed pastoral practice as they grow in their identity as ecclesial ministers. The research has affirmed the pivotal role of the theological reflection seminar, as an essential component of the Ecclesial Ministry Programme.
Chapter Six

Food for the Journey

We set the pace.
   But this press of time –
take it as a little thing
   next to what endures.

All this hurrying
   soon will be over.
Only when we tarry
   do we touch the holy.\textsuperscript{255}

6.1 Introduction

“Only when we tarry / do we touch the holy.” In this research “the holy” – the inner journey of people’s lives – has been touched. The aim of this research was to listen to the voices of graduates of the Education for Ecclesial Ministry programme in order to learn about their experience of the theological reflection seminar when they were students. It has left me with more questions about theological reflection than when I began the work. My purpose was to explore the role of the seminar in the formation of ecclesial ministers, most of who will work in the church in Ireland. The research aimed to ascertain if the theological reflection seminar facilitated the integration of the human, spiritual, academic and pastoral dimensions of the programme. Did the seminar enable students to articulate an operative theology for ministry? Building on both of these questions, the researcher also tried to ascertain if the seminar helped to form and appropriate a ministerial identity.

\textsuperscript{255} Rainer Maria Rilke, Sonnets to Orpheus, Part One XXII, \textit{In Praise of Mortality}, translated and edited by Anita Barrows and Joanna Macy (New York: Penguin, 2005).
This case study is but one example and it is not possible to generalize the conclusions that have been gained to all theological reflection seminars. Nevertheless, in this chapter I will highlight the strengths of and the challenges faced by the seminar from the research, which may add to the on-going debate on the place of the theological reflection seminar in ministry formation. Finally, this chapter will suggest some recommendations on the theological reflection seminar for formation programmes for full-time ecclesial ministry and for future research.

6.2 The Role of the Theological Reflection Seminar in Ministry Education

The strengths of and challenges faced by the seminar will be addressed under the four headings that I have used throughout the research, namely:

- the goals and process of the theological reflection seminar;
- the integration of the human, spiritual, academic and pastoral dimensions of the programme;
- the naming of an operative theology for ministry;
- the formation and appropriation of a ministerial identity.

6.2.1 Strengths

The research data confirms that the theological reflection seminar was a formative and influential experience for the research participants. The seminar was a structured environment where time was set aside for sharing and listening to experiences that had impacted on the participants’ ministry experience. When it was a safe place, where trust
was established, the participants were able to share with honesty and openness. Through
the model of reflection provided, they learnt to think about their actions and put words on
their experiences. They deepened their self-awareness and grew in confidence. Through
the giving and receiving of critique on the issues involved, they unpacked the different
layers they encountered in pastoral ministry and theological studies. The discipline of the
seminar called for accountability and transparency.

The cut and thrust of the group stretched them to develop personal, social and
communication skills for pastoral work. Through presenting and discussion a situation in
either written or visual form, the seminar group helped individuals to unveil the shroud of
mystery in which ministry is sometimes draped. It called for professionalism and
accountability. There was an element of peer supervision and a need to face the
responsibilities of ministry in a disciplined manner. In the light of many issues, especially
safeguarding children and vulnerable adults, this is very relevant for ecclesial ministry
today. The group sharing reflected the uniqueness of each person and the bond of
community presented in the Trinity. The group was also a microcosm of the diversity of
society since the participants themselves brought a wide range of personalities and gifts.

The research participants learnt the centrality of networking and the fostering of
relationships from the insights of their companions. The solidarity of a group of like-
mined companions reduced the sense of isolation that some participants experienced in
ministry. The role of the facilitator, not a member of the seminary formation team, was
pivotal to the success of the seminar. This role is now shared by external facilitators and
members of the Theology Faculty. When she or he was neutral in their role as facilitator,
ensuring that the process was followed, the group members were enabled to challenge and be challenged by the issues that surfaced in the seminar.

As the research participants faced their own human strengths and weaknesses in the group, sharing in the theological reflection seminar acted as leveller. This sharing alerted them to human frailty and vulnerability in themselves and others. The participants learnt to acknowledge that sometimes their own personality, their emotions or their use of academic language could block the reign of God in ministry. They were very aware of the challenge of a secular culture to their faith and of how many people in the Christian community saw the church as a possible “service station” for their ritual needs. The seminar helped the participants resolve the faith-based difference between their role in pastoral ministry and that of a social worker.

Resistance to group reflection was expressed through the participants having to leave their comfort zone and look at their own personal and ministerial issues. Yet, through their questioning of the seminar, its academic or pastoral value, each one came to an appreciation of how it prepared them in the long-term for ministry. The seminar called the research participants to address the social, cultural and academic implications of their pastoral practice. In particular they had to look at their own faith journey and the faith-journey of the care-receiver as they explored ways to share the Good News.

One of the greatest strengths of the seminar was that it called on the research participants to name and articulate their operative theology for ministry. This was a difficult process and while it was often limited to a Scripture reference that gave them a
metaphor for God, it was the guiding force in both their attitudes and actions when in ministry.

The seminar provided a context for the exploration of a ministerial identity. It planted the seeds for formation of this identity and called the research participants to look in particularly at their human and Christian identity. In the seminar many of the characteristics and qualities of ministerial identity emerged and were addressed. The research participants grappled with their role, the practice of ministry and their need to be witnesses of the Gospel in a church that is itself facing a leadership and identity crisis at this time. The research participants were clear that they did not just represent themselves, but a wider Christian tradition. The seminar provided fertile soil in which seeds were planted for the on-going formation and appropriation of a ministerial identity into the future. There was practical awareness among the participants that by being reflective practitioners, they were better equipped to live with ambiguity in the present cultural context and to navigate the widening gulf between academic theology and pastoral practice in the twenty-first century. Since there is little research completed in this area in Ireland, it was not possible to compare the work with existing material.

6.2.2 Challenges and Issues

The research highlighted a number of issues that are a challenge to the Education for Ecclesial Ministry programme, namely:

- the continuing need to address the integration of the academic as well a pastoral dimension of pastoral theology;
• the need to give time to prepare the group for the dynamics involved in group work and the theological reflection seminar in ministry formation;

• the need to provide greater preparation for group work, since even in a highly technical and complex communication age, many ministry students experience difficulty in either being “able” or “willing” to share their thoughts and their feelings in a group about their experiences in ministry;

• the facilitator of the seminar needs to be a person from outside the seminary and possibly the faculty for students in the ministry formation programme;

• to need to affirm the value among formation teams, ministry students and full-time ecclesial ministers of sharing ministry experiences in a facilitated, supportive, trusting and confidential group context;

• even in a demanding busy and noisy ministerial context, reflection is as integral as prayer and reading as pastoral practice;

• the importance of encouraging graduates of the programme to seek companions in ministry with whom they could find the resources necessary to include group theological reflection as an integral part of their ecclesial ministry.

Cognizance has to be taken in the research of the diversity of students who present for ministry in terms of life experience, heritage, education, and spiritual needs. The research has highlighted the necessity for a wider variety of models of reflection to meet this diversity by incorporating technology, art and other creative means to present ministry situations and issues.
Ministry students expect an element of excitement in pastoral theology and often feel disappointment when they do not see their Christian idealism realized in practice. Inevitably, the research participants have had this idealism challenged. They are very aware of the lacunae that exist since theological reflection does not continue once they are in full-time ministry. This begs the question: What unifies or integrates the human, spiritual, academic and pastoral dimensions of the pastoral minister’s life after formation if not through theological reflection?

The research has shown that in addition to helping students explore their human and Christian identity, they need support and encouragement in exploring their ministerial identity. The narrow or limited experience of Christian living that many students have experienced prior to presenting themselves for ministry formation is a challenge to the Ecclesial Ministry Programme. The research has shown that it is necessary to help the seminar participants explore their own embedded theology and their understanding of Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist in order to deepen their operative theology for ministry. Appropriation of ministerial identity is a circular or spiral process of transformation and conversion that is constantly being repeated.

The research revealed that any glimmer of progress towards the formation of ministerial identity came through affirmation on two levels: affirmation or critique of the task that was performed and affirmation of themselves as individuals. What if this affirmation does not come at either level today? What would be the consequential effect on the individual ministers and on the work of ministry and on the church? If lack of affirmation exists for ecclesial ministers today, what supplies this missing support
structure? Since the number of retiring ecclesial ministers, often mainly priests and religious, far outweighs the numbers being initiated into ministry, even with restructuring, a heavy work load will fall on a few. There is a danger that the greater demands made on ministers will lead to burn-out and perhaps even disillusionment. The challenge today is to form reflective practitioners to meet the demands of ministry where they may have to seek the affirmation from their own inner resources and through the companionship of small groups of reflective Christians.

Living in the wake of four government inquiries to child abuse and the mismanagement of church leadership, the community in which ministry students will practice is changing rapidly in Ireland. Commitment to the mission and ministry of Christ calls for a new approach. This requires collaboration with the people of God. It calls for accountability, transparency and companionship. The role of the ecclesial minister has to move from being a service provider to being an enabler, a facilitator, a resource person and a servant leader in the community. Most of all, she or he needs to be able to delegate in ministry and exercise the principle of subsidiarity. The pressure on ecclesial ministers – in either parish ministry or specialized ministries such as chaplaincies in health care, education and the prison systems – call for ministers to be reflective practitioners.

The pace of life today requires self-discipline and time management to pause and take space for reflection. It is a risk to be part of a group of people and to share one’s ministry issues and situations. Yet, the support of like-minded people is necessary for the health and well-being of the ministry as well as for evangelization. The absence of such a theological reflection group is too high a price to pay for the support and affirmation of
the minister. In a climate of negativity towards the church it is important for ecclesial ministers to be supported in ministry at a local level by people who are able and willing to share. The theological reflection seminar could provide this constructive support.

6.3 Overall Conclusions

In ministry there is resistance to reflecting and theorizing from practice and practical reflection on academic theology. This resistance is complex and requires more reflection than is possible here. The very experience of being a Christian in community in a society that is highly individualistic is a challenge for students today. There is a heavy emphasis on experience, yet the priority placed on tradition and the church teaching in a transitional culture requires careful navigation. The challenge remains to develop practice-based reflection seminars that allow for the complexity of theological interpretation and integration. This reflection needs to take place alongside attention to complex patterns of resistance to the Christian message which can on occasion, masquerade as concern or social awareness. At its best, the theological reflection seminar develops “dialogue and exploratory, open conversation about resistance to learning, as a means of learning and growth in awareness.”

6.4 The Contribution of the Study

The research on the role of theological reflection in the Education for Ecclesial Ministry programme has:

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given new insights on theological reflection and affirmed the role of the theological reflection seminar in the Education for Ecclesial Ministry programme in St Patrick’s College, Maynooth;

- opened-up new ways in which the theological reflection seminar could be a more effective tool for formation as students prepare for ministry in Ireland;
- shown that it could be a resource for other formation programmes for ministry in Ireland and Europe;
- strengthened the argument for the inclusion of “regular, formal and disciplined” theological reflection, especially group reflection, as an integral part of many ecclesial ministries.

### 6.5 Recommendations

The research has engendered the following recommendations:

- the Faculty of Theology needs to examine additional ways in which the theological reflection seminar could help participants integrate the academic as well as the pastoral dimension of pastoral theology;
- the students’ understanding of their own embedded theology should be explored in theological reflection, in particular in the theological reflection seminar;
- there is a need to examine new ways in which the seminar could enable the students to continue to form and appropriate a ministerial identity in line with the students’ experiences of changing ministerial structures;
- the relationship between ecclesiology and ministerial identity, not only from a theory perspective but also from a praxis perspective, needs to be addressed;
• the on-going exploration of the understanding of an operative theology and
ecclesiology for ministry among those whose role it is to confirm the presence of
a ministerial identity in prospective candidates for ministry;
• the process of accepting students into the Education for Ecclesial Ministry
programme needs to be reviewed. Since, depending on the position from which
this question of suitability for ministry is asked, the response will vary. When
asked from the perspective of ministry – of needs – the criteria are more inclusive.
When asked from the perspective of the minister the criteria are more restricted.
Here, the criteria are indicative of a certain element of stability and permanence
rather than a vision of the missionary, the evangelist;
• there is a continuing need to address the integration of the academic as well a
pastoral dimension of pastoral theology both in the minister and in the pastoral
reality;
• there is a need to provide greater preparation for group dynamics, since even in a
highly technical and complex communication age, many ministry students
experience difficulty in either being “able” or “willing” to share their thoughts
and their feelings in a group about their experiences in ministry;
• the facilitator of the seminar needs to be a person from outside the seminary and
possibly outside the Faculty for students in the ministry formation programme;
• even in a demanding busy and noisy ministerial context, reflection must be as
integral as prayer and reading in order to bring about the Reign of God in pastoral
practice;
there is a need to affirm the value of the theological reflection seminar among full-time ecclesial ministers as a way of sharing ministry experiences in a facilitated, supportive, trusting and confidential group context;

- the way in which the theological reflection seminar could be an element in the ongoing formation and socialization of the ecclesial minister needs to be addressed. This will help to ensure ministers will have some support and solidarity that provides peer supervision and reduces a sense of isolation in ministry;

- graduates of the programme should be encouraged to seek companions in ministry with whom they could find the resources necessary to include group theological reflection as an integral part of their ecclesial ministry

6.6 The Last Word

This research has shown that the seeds of the formative value of theological reflection, especially the theological reflection seminar, for pastoral practice have been planted among people who have recently entered ministry. This research has confirmed that theological reflection, when it is understood as “the discipline of exploring individual and corporate experience in conversation with the wisdom of a religious heritage” and when “the conversation is a genuine dialogue that seeks to hear from our own beliefs, actions, and perspectives, as well as those of the tradition” it helps to form a reflective practitioner.²⁵⁷

²⁵⁷ Killen and de Beer, The Art of Theological Reflection, viii.
The research has affirmed the belief that situations or issues, when addressed from a variety of perspectives within a group, bring hope and give meaning to life.

To close I leave the final words to Rilke:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{All this hurrying} \\
&\text{soon will be over.} \\
\text{Only when we tarry} \\
&\text{do we touch the holy.}^\text{258}
\end{align*}
\]

\textsuperscript{258} Rilke, Sonnets to Orpheus, Part One XXII, \textit{In Praise of Mortality}. 
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Appendix 1

Thesis Proposal
And
Bibliography

Theological Reflection in Education for Ecclesial Ministry:

The Role of Theological Reflection in the
Formation and Appropriation of Ministerial Identity

A DMin Thesis Proposal
Submitted to the DMin Programme Committee
Toronto School of Theology
31. 05.11

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Theological Reflection in Education for Ecclesial Ministry: The Role of Theological Reflection in the Formation and Appropriation of Ministerial Identity

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Theological Reflection in Education for Ecclesial Ministry: The Role of Theological Reflection in the Formation and Appropriation of Ministerial Identity

1. **Background and Context of the Applied Research Thesis**

Theological reflection is a process of discerning where and how God is present and at work in a person’s life against the backdrop of scripture, theology, and Church tradition. In ecclesial ministry theological reflection is the “discipline of exploring individual and corporate experience in conversation with the wisdom of a religious heritage. The conversation is a genuine dialogue that seeks to hear from (our own) beliefs, actions, and perspectives, as well as those of the tradition. It respects the integrity of both.”

1.1 **Research Context**

The context of the research is the Education for Ecclesial Ministry programme in the Pontifical University, St Patrick’s College, Maynooth. Students are awarded a Master’s Degree in Pastoral Theology on completion. The student body is composed of lay people and seminarians preparing for ecclesial ministry. It also includes some priests who wish to renew their pastoral theology. The students represent a wide variation in age, culture, experience, education and pastoral ministry. All participate in a weekly meeting of the Theological Reflection Seminar. I have overall responsibility for the direction of the programme, teach two modules and facilitate one of the theological reflection seminars.

In Education for Reflective Ministry, Van der Ven notes that the work of proclamation, service and witness to the reign of God is becoming more complex and

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dynamic in a rapidly changing, secular world.\textsuperscript{260} The ecclesial minister no longer works in a straightforward and unambiguous pastoral context either in Ireland or in Europe. Ministers today must collaborate with the community in which they work. They are called to be part of a team which may consist of a priest, lay ecclesial minister, parish secretary, catechist and permanent deacon. More often than not, the minister is surrounded by a multiplicity of voices demanding simultaneous attention. These voices can come from the community where one ministers, from contemporary culture, and from within oneself. The image of God that influences people’s faith-life is still caught between a “more remote monarch who was omniscient and omnipotent, who presided in judgement over the affairs of the world and its peoples . . . [and] a more biblical approach to imaging a [Triune] God.”\textsuperscript{261} This theology has, in turn, influenced a wide variety of ecclesiologies. \textit{Lumen Gentium} presented the Catholic Church as a community of communities rather than as a universal, monolithic static institution.\textsuperscript{262} Yet both of these models of church, and a wide variety of models in between, still exist within the Christian community. Ministering, where these ambiguities and paradoxes are present, is a challenge for pastoral ministers today and for theological/pastoral education.\textsuperscript{263}

At a time when sociologists are abandoning the paradigm that equated modernization with secularisation, in Ireland, as in many “other countries in Western Europe, there is a post-modern toleration of religion in the private sphere, but considerable suspicion of any attempt to bring a critique to bear on public life from a

\textsuperscript{260} Johannes A. Van der Ven, \textit{Education for Reflective Ministry} (Louvain: Peeters, 1998), 11-43.
\textsuperscript{261} Eugene Duffy, “Clustering Parishes,” \textit{The Furrow} 61, no. 6 (June 2010): 343.
\textsuperscript{263} Richard R. Gaillardetz, \textit{Ecclesiology for a Global Church} (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2008).
religious perspective.” The Ryan and Murphy reports (2009) on child sexual abuse have shaken the confidence that some people have traditionally placed in the Catholic Church. It is argued that child sexual abuse by religious and clergy and the appalling way that it has been handled by leadership at diocesan and congregational level are symptomatic of deeper issues within the church. These issues include inadequate preparation for ministry (especially in the areas of human and spiritual development), clericalism, abuse of power, the hierarchical and closed structure of the church, and an accountability that is only one-way.

1.2 Research Interest

The role of theological reflection, as it unfolds in the Theological Reflection Seminar component of the Education for Ecclesial Ministry programme is the focus of my research. The theological reflection seminar is one area in the programme where it is possible to address the development of a ministerial identity in students. In order to examine how this happens, my research question is: What is the role of theological reflection, as it unfolds in the theological reflection seminar, in the formation and appropriation of ministerial identity? The definition of theological reflection offered by Killen and de Beer provides the approach that I will take to theological reflection in this

264 Gerry O’Hanlon, Theology in the Irish Public Square (Dublin: Columba, 2010), 7.
A number of Catholic Church documents of the last twenty-five years have addressed formation for different roles in ecclesial ministry including priesthood, consecrated life, the permanent diaconate and lay-ecclesial ministry. These documents have addressed contextual issues; presented a theology of and for ministry; outlined four main dimensions in the formation for ministry programme; and articulated the need for ongoing formation in ministry. However, little attention or direction is given in the documents on how these areas are integrated in the formation process or how they enable a person to develop a ministerial identity. For me, reflection, in particular group theological reflection, is one of the keys to unlocking this process. It helps create a format and a context in which to pause, ask questions, and reflect on ministry from a theoretical, practical and identity point of view. It also places the students in a context of accountability and critique among their peers, while engaging the human, spiritual, academic and pastoral elements of their formation.

In this research I will explore how reflection facilitates the integration of beliefs and practice and brings the student to see that theology as “text” and theology as “context” are one enterprise. Reflection requires an ability to combine diverse elements of perception. It addresses the interrelationship between each area in order to see that the whole is in fact greater than the parts. It creates a context for integration. Integration in this study will be understood as “a formative process that engages students in traditions of theological knowledge, pastoral practice, and Christian identity as they examine, re-interpret and commit themselves to a worldview that bears the deep imprint of those

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267 Killen and John de Beer, *The Art of Theological Reflection*, 51.
This definition presumes that there is permeability between knowledge, experience, spirituality, and identity. It also assumes that there is openness to new ideas and possibilities in order to allow for change and transformation. New insights, new truth and meaning for living, are not just other constructs but things that change a person at his or her core, forming a new identity.

The development of a ministerial identity is a slow and evolving process and can be understood at two levels. The subjective identity is the freely claimed self-consciousness of a person in the performance of her or his work. The objective identity is confirmed in the individual by others. Presuming the presence of an integrated personality structure (in reality this, of course, is not always possible), identity in ministry can be defined as the commitment made by an adult Christian to Pattern his or her life consistently on the objective values and ideals that the specific ministry requires. While identity is about the personality, character, originality, and uniqueness of a person, vocation, which I see as integral to ministerial identity, is described as a divine call to a sense of fitness for a career or occupation.

Vocation constitutes the three interrelated aspects of personhood in adult life: who the Lord calls us to be (our self-identity); how the Lord calls us to become our unique selves in God (our vocational lifestyle); what the Lord calls us to do for God and for others (our mission or ministry). An additional element, why the Lord calls us to be engaged in God’s mission is also an integral part of vocational, and therefore ministerial,

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identity. To know *who we are* and *why we are called to be* in ministry, students need more than knowledge of theology or be involved at the coal-face of ministry. It is necessary to appropriate a theology and spirituality for ministry into their faith-filled personal and professional lives. This process of naming and articulating an “operative theology for ministry” helps the candidate gain clarity on both *who* they are and *why* they are engaged in ministry. How does the theological reflection process make this possible?

2. **Research Problem**

A number of students have difficulty in developing a ministerial identity in the Education for Ecclesial Ministry programme. There is considerable energy and enthusiasm in students to be involved in the mission of God and of the Church. However, they speak of vulnerability, ambiguity, and confusion about their ministerial identity. Ministry education attracts a variety of students and generally they are keen to establish themselves in their ministry placement. They possess considerable energy and enthusiasm for involvement, and want to share some of the knowledge they have gained in their theological studies, as well as their own life/faith experience. They are engaged in catechesis, liturgy, service, community, administration and in the general activities of their placement education experience. One of the aims of theological reflection is not just to be a bridge, but to help students to integrate ministerial practice (how), theological knowledge (what), personal development (who) and a spiritual journey (why) in their ministry? These four dimensions of the programme can sometimes stand isolated. It seems as though four gardens are being created in isolation within the one area being
cultivated, each very valuable in itself, but without reference to the value and function of the garden landscape as a whole, that is a single ministerial engagement. When this happens, students are less able to think contextually and theologically, develop an operative theology for ministry and see pastoral ministry as one theological enterprise.

A limited understanding of what it means to be a disciple of Christ has a marked influence on the students’ development of an operative theology for ministry. Some who are social extraverts, activists or committed to social justice can get absorbed into the situations of people’s lives.\(^{270}\) They tend to have a pragmatic approach to ministry and experience the pastoral and contextual aspect of the work, but often fail to make theological connections. Other students, who are attracted to theological theories and doctrines, people who are introverts or had “conversion” experiences, can forget to make contextual connections or give an appropriate pastoral response. In both these situations, students are absorbed in the “how” and “what” of ministry. They easily fall into the dangerous expectation that they must have all the answers, build “kingdoms” not of the gospel and so put themselves at the centre of their work. When everything is going well, the minister in either situation will see herself or himself as doing well. However when problems arise such as: unresponsiveness or rejection from the community; lack of solidarity from co-workers; aloneness; awareness of the gap between the gospels/the teachings of the church and the lived reality of people’s lives, students experience an identity crisis. Identity issues of “who am I” in the ministry situation and “why am I

\(^{270}\) These are some of the diverse groups of students that present for ministry (rather than psychological types): as identified by Klimoski, O’Neil, and Schuth in *Educating Leaders for Ministry: Issues and Responses*, 1-25.
doing what I am doing” move the students into another level of engagement in ministry.

How can theological reflection meet these problems as they arise for the students?

3. **Theoretical Framework and Assumptions Involved in the Study**

3. a. **Assumptions at Work in the Study**

The purpose of this research is to explore the role of theological reflection, in particular the theological reflection seminar in forming a ministerial identity. It is predicated by three assumptions:

- reflection, both personal and communal, is central to learning and is a critical part of the education for ministry programme. A disciplined approach to learning and reflection does not come naturally and requires guidance, methodology and praxis.  

- reflection, especially theological reflection within a group, facilitates the integration of the human, spiritual, theological and pastoral dimensions of the learning experiences within the programme. The interaction and accountability required by group participation affirms the need for community and collaboration in ministry.

- through the theological reflection process, ministry students are helped form, and in time appropriate a ministerial identity, by articulating an operative theology for ministry, which unites “personal faith, knowledge about faith and academic study and ministry experience.”

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3.b. Theory at Work in the Study

3.b.1 Education for Ecclesial Ministry

To explore the role of theological reflection in developing ministerial identity, these assumptions will be addressed within the following areas: formation for ecclesial ministry; theological reflection; theology for and of ministry; and ministerial identity.\(^{274}\)

To place the Education for Ecclesial Ministry programme in a theological and ecclesial context I will explore elements in relation to formation for ministry from four Vatican documents and three from Episcopal Conferences.\(^ {275}\) All affirm that the foundation for Christian mission and ministry is the call to all God’s people to discipleship through baptism.\(^ {276}\) While addressing the identity and formation of each specific ministry group, the documents share a common focus in seeing these take place within the human, spiritual, intellectual and pastoral dimensions of formation.

Van der Ven sees the primary focus of ministry education as bringing the student to see ministry as a reflective profession, pastoral work as reflective practice and the

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\(^{274}\) In this research I will use the terms “ecclesial minister” and “minister” to refer to pastoral leaders who serve in parishes and specialized ministries, (for example; chaplaincies in education, health care). Behind the names and titles are diverse conceptions of ministry, ordination and office that have considerable significance in shaping pastoral work and leadership in the Christian community. Here I will address education for ecclesiastical ministry and its power to shape the people who exercise pastoral leadership, whatever their ecclesiastical office or pastoral role.


minister as a reflective practitioner. Acknowledging the inadequacy of the therapeutic and managerial education models of formation, he proposes a reflective ministry model, which is placed within the “dialectical tension between religion and church.”

Theological reflection enables this conversation to take place. Osborne holds that “one of the greatest challenges to the church today is finding fitting forms of leadership and community that will speak to the 75 or more percent of Europeans who fall into the categories of ‘believing and not belonging, ‘belonging but not believing,’ and ‘not believing but belonging’ today.”

Schuth notes that the diversity of students presenting for ministry formation today (in areas of heritage, culture, education, and church experience) creates great challenges for educators and people in formation. In *Educating Leaders for Ministry* this same diversity is addressed by approaching integration from a developmental perspective. Cahalan, building on the foundation of Christian discipleship outlines the practices of ministry and the theological grounds for each of these. The difficulty, however, is how to enable the student to see these as integral to her or his identity, not just her or his actions, as pastoral ministers. For Gula, a vocational and professional approach to ministry today requires “the special duty of the

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pastoral minister is to become theologically competent, especially in the skill of theological reflection.”

The educational methodology for the *Education in Ecclesial Ministry* programme is grounded in the *Ignatian Pedagogy: A Practical Approach Education for Reflective Ministry.* Jesuit and Ignatian principles of education have long presented a pedagogical paradigm that addresses context, experience, reflection, action, and evaluation that are understood in the light of the *Spiritual Exercises* of Ignatius Loyola. This methodology seeks to transform how people look at themselves and other human beings, at social systems and societal structures, at the global community and the whole of creation. This section will also address the present role of theological reflection in the Education for Ecclesial Ministry programme in the Pontifical University, Maynooth.

### 3.b.2 Theological Reflection

Reflection enables us to be aware and to develop self-awareness. Van der Ven identifies several layers of reflection and makes a distinction between reflection *in* ministry and reflection *on* ministry. He sees the need for a methodological approach and argues that theological reflection *on* ministry is served by experiencing the seven phases of Dewey’s analysis of problem raising and problem solving. Here theological reflection is a way of looking back on what has taken place with the possibility of imposing some order on a “messy” reality in ministry. This echoes the work of Schön who argues for a distinctive

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285 Van der Ven, *Education for Reflective Ministry*, 211.
structure of reflection which must be susceptible to a rigor that is both like and unlike the rigor of scholarly and controlled experiment.286

Several models and methods for theological reflection, in particular group reflection, have been developed in recent years. Collins sees the purpose of theological reflection as, first, “to discern one’s own operative theology,” and second, to “contribute to a healthy sense of pastoral and personal identity.”287 Kinast holds that the role of theological reflection, as a way of learning from one’s experience, is to be orientated towards action and change.288 He proposes five styles of theological reflection: ministerial, spiritual wisdom, feminist, inculturation and practical. The process moves through reflection on experience, theological correlation and praxis. For him experience is both objective and subjective and must consider the lived theology of the faithful where the Spirit is at work in the lives of the community. Kinast uses case studies, verbatim, critical incidents and journal entries. These concrete methods lead theological reflection to focus as much on the people as on the issues involved in ministry. It is this that makes his approach suitable for the development of ministerial identity.

Whitehead and Whitehead’s ministry model has been developed for a ministry context with an eye to its’ being portable (into daily life), performable (resulting in action) and communal.289 It is a “conversational” model and method which is particularly valuable for formation as they see theological reflection to be more fruitful when done in

groups. Reflection takes place in three stages through a process of attending (seeking out information), assertion, (gathering different perspectives) and pastoral response. Killen and de Beer’s model, while not dissimilar to that of the Whiteheads, addresses both “why” and “how” theological reflection takes place.\(^{290}\) It includes a person’s own faith journey, her or his theological stance and the human/affective elements as essential parts of the reflection. The need to identify “the heart of the matter” keeps the process focused, since for them, theological reflection is the correlation between the insights gained in the experience and themes from the Christian tradition. Both are for the sake of new meaning and growth. Graham, Walton and Ward hold that practical theology has shaken off the image of simply passing on practical skills or being dependent on the resources of social science. This change is a transition from the therapeutic to a hermeneutic model of pastoral engagement in which the activity of theological reflection assumes centre stage.\(^{291}\)

All the models agree that theological reflection is significant in helping ministers to engage contextually and theologically by enabling them to meet the pastoral needs of people and sustain a community of faith. Three main goals emerge from all the models: a level of integration between beliefs and practice, thoughts and feelings, and the “who” and “what “of ministry; the desire to understand how God is working in a situation/issue (theology for ministry), and the need for action, change and transformation within the situation.

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\(^{290}\) Killen and deBeer, *The Art of Theological Reflection*.

3.b.3 Theology for and of Ministry

The theology for ministry in which this research is grounded is based on the belief that each person is created in the image and likeness of God. All are called to reflect this self-giving love of a Triune God. In a Trinitarian community, we are called to maintain relationships of loving communion: God to us, we to God, and we to each other. Creation reveals this relational and loving God (Ps 26, 119 and 139). In the Covenant model of pastoral ministry, God takes the initiative in grace and love (Ex 6:7). This love overflows in the incarnation of Jesus Christ, God among us. It is through the fullness of all these relationships that God calls us to live in a community that exemplifies this love. We are not so much seekers as the ones being sought after. God calls: we respond. Quoting the prophet Isaiah, Jesus identifies himself as the anointed one (Lk 4:18-19). He presents the “why” of mission side by side with the “what” of ministry revealing his identity and theology for mission and ministry.

The biblical metaphor “I am thirsty” (Jn 19:28) is central to my ministry. The Samaritan woman in responding to the “thirst” of Jesus is overcome by the revelation of “herself to herself” and of “God through Jesus” in the conversation. It is only when she is “filled” with this experience and knowledge of God, that she is able to share the gift that Jesus has offered her (Jn 4:42). Reflection groups in ministry formation provide this opportunity for conversation and personal awareness in the practice and vision of ministry.

Theology of ministry is grounded in the re-establishment by Vatican II of the mission and ministry of baptized-confirmed Christians as the foundation of all church
ministries. Ministry is the “vocation of leading disciples in the life of discipleship for the sake of God’s mission in the world.” Through Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist, all Christians share in Jesus’ role as prophet by partaking in the work of teaching and preaching; as priest by growing in holiness; and as king by sharing the service-leadership ministry of the church. The foundation of the mission and ministry of the church is based on three things: God’s sending of Jesus, the mission and ministry of Jesus permeating the church, and that all Christians are spiritually inspired and energised by Jesus’ own mission and ministry.

3.b.4 Ministerial Identity

Identity is described in the Oxford Dictionary of English as the condition of being a specified person. Identity, therefore, is about the personality, character, originality and uniqueness of a person. Jesus, in his conviction of God’s love for him (Matt 3:17), was keen that his disciples would receive her or his identity from him: “Who do people say that I am?” (Matt 16:13-15). Identity is something I am rather than have and yet it is essentially a socially constructed reality. While it is not within the scope of this research to analyse the insights of scientific psychology, research in this area shows that identity is elusive, developmental, dialectical and relational. Ministerial identity must reveal the continuity of discipleship and the distinctiveness of the leadership role. It must be a unifying force in the day-to-day experience of self and over the years of a person’s life. At the same time, this identity must be distinct and unique among other identities.

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292 Cahalan, Introducing the Practice of Ministry, 50.
Ministerial identity is first dependant on Christian identity which is grounded in discipleship, and in the call to lead disciples. Second, it is a public act, acknowledged by the Christian community through commissioning. O’Meara holds that the fundamental identity of the minister is expressed in the six biblical characteristics of ministry. For him ministry is: “doing something; for the advent and presence of the kingdom of God; in public; on behalf of a Christian community; as a gift received in faith, baptism, and ordination, and as an activity with its own limits, and identity existing within a diversity of ministerial actions.”

Cahalan’s definition of ministry expands and elaborates on O’Meara’s basic claims in order to give greater clarity to what ministry involves. Both are affirming that the identity of the minister is founded in and flows from the common identity shared by all Christians, is recognized in and through charismatic gifts which itself enables service in the community, and is commissioned or conferred sacramentally. The criteria for ministerial identity in this research will be the student’s ability to be lead disciples in the Christian community (indicative of the human and spiritual development of the minister), for the sake of discipleship lived in relationship to God’s mission (theology for ministry). Further criteria will be the students’ ability to be public witnesses (of a gift received through faith, baptism, charism and vocation and be) acknowledged by the community. Ministerial identity is revealed through practice that exists within a diversity of ecclesial contexts, roles, and relationships (integration of the human, spiritual, academic and pastoral dimensions of the programme). Issues of identity

294 Thomas F. O’Meara, Theology of Ministry (New York: Paulist Press, 1999), 141.
295 Cahalan, Introducing the Practice of Ministry, 55.
296 Schner, Education for Ministry, 98.
and practice are deeply intertwined and the discernment about who I am as a minister and what the call means in my life continues over the years of practice in multiple contexts of learning and service. I aim to identify how, as reflective practitioners, the theological reflection seminar enables the students to develop this ministerial identity.

4. Ministry-in-Action Component

4.1 Ministry-in-Action: Qualitative Research

Qualitative research is an attempt to access and understand the unique ways that individuals and communities inhabit and encounter the world. It assumes that human beings are by definition interpretative creatures; that the ways in which they make sense of the world and experiences within it involve a constant process of interpretation and meaning-seeking.297 In the research I will be recording and interpreting the participant’s experience, hearing their experience of the theological reflection group, because within qualitative research, “narrative knowledge is perceived to be a legitimate, rigorous and a valid form of knowledge that informs us about the world in ways which are publicly significant.”298 My overall research question is:

What is the role of theological reflection and the outcomes of that process, as it unfolds in the weekly meeting of the Theological Reflection Seminar, in the formation and appropriation of ministerial identity in the Education for Ecclesial Ministry programme? In terms of:

1. the goals and methodology of theological reflection.

298 Swinton and Mowat, Practical Theology and Qualitative Research, 38.
2. the integration of the human, spiritual, academic and pastoral dimensions of the programme.

3. the naming and articulating of a theology for ministry.

4. the formation and appropriation of a ministerial identity.

5. does this case offer an example for other situations that the theological reflection seminar enables students to form and appropriate a ministerial identity?

4.2 Respondents in the Research and Rationale for Selection

In qualitative research Morgan suggests a source of four to twelve people is viable for a study.299 I will work with five people, drawn at random from a cluster of twenty graduates of the Education for Ecclesial Ministry programme in St Patrick’s College between 2007 and 2010 who are presently engaged in full-time ecclesial ministry. Given the three main sources of information that will be used, I believe five, a quarter of the pool available; will give sufficient information to validate the findings. “In practice, the complexity of the competing factors of resources and accuracy means that the decision on sample size tends to be based on experience and good judgement rather than relying on a strict mathematical formula.”300 My rationale for selecting graduates is that all have been directly involved in the same model of theological reflection seminar in the same programme. In addition, graduates will be able to see if their experience in the seminar

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has helped them to continue to reflect theologically and to appropriate a ministerial identity that has been tested and hopefully expanded through their recent experience in ministry. This will add breadth and depth to the research. The graduates will be chosen using probability sampling, that is, people who are chosen as a cluster sample will be a representative cross section of the people who participated in the seminar. I will aim to ensure that the group will consist of women and men, lay and clerical, with at least one from a different culture. This may involve multi-stage sampling; selecting samples from within samples.\textsuperscript{301}

4.3 Place of Research

The focus group and the interviews will take place in a location mutually agreed by the parties involved. Approval has been given for the use of St Patrick’s College, Maynooth as a possible site for the research.\textsuperscript{302} The graduates will be asked to reply to the questionnaire on-line, within seven days of reception.

4.4 My Role in the Research and Time Line

As a programme director and as a student, I will take a reflexive approach to the research. I will consider not just the students experience of theological reflection, but also the relationship of this experience to the whole programme, to the formation of ministerial identity and to my part within this work. Inevitably the meaning I give to the experiences and ideas of the participants are shaped by my experience and the values, norms, and

\textsuperscript{301} Martyn Denscombe, \textit{The Good Research Guide} (Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2007), 16.

\textsuperscript{302} Appendix 4. B: \textit{Letter of Approval for the Site of the Research}. 
concepts I have assimilated in my lifetime. This process of critical reflection will enable me to monitor and respond to my own contributions to the proceedings, as well as those of the participants. As the researcher I will:

- facilitate and record a focus group discussion and the interviews
- prepare and ensure the completion of the research questionnaire
- collate the findings from the focus group, the questionnaire, the interviews and my personal field notes with secretarial assistance
- ensure that the recorded data is transcribed in written form, coded and prepared for analysis and interpretation. Thematic analysis will involve colour coding the data according to key words, symbols, concepts and meanings that emerge as themes. Data within each theme will then be collated and placed in categories for further analysis, so that the material is winnowed down to key points
- destroy the information from this research on completion of the thesis (in 2012).

Time Line:

July-December 2011
- Facilitate the focus group, administer the questionnaire and conduct the interviews
- Collate, code and analyse the data (as outlined below)
- Write the Thesis and submit it to the Toronto School of Theology.

5. Qualitative Research Methodology Operative in the Analysis of the Ministry in-Action

The case study approach focuses on one area of a particular phenomenon. This case study will be an in-depth study of one area of the programme, the theological reflection seminar. The aim is to illuminate the general by looking at the particular. Case studies tend to be more “holistic” rather than address “isolated” factors. They deal with

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relationships and processes which are interconnected and interrelated in social settings. It will provide a detailed account of the experiences, relationships and learning occurring within the seminar. This method has been chosen because it has “clear boundaries.”

The case study is a bounded system by the question being addressed and by time and place as a “within-site study” since all of the graduates who will participate in the research have been engaged in the seminar, in the same programme, in the same College between the years 2006-2010.

The case study will involve “multiple sources of information in data collection to provide a detailed in-depth picture.” The triangulation of a focus group, a questionnaire and an interview will help to validate the findings of the research. My own field notes will allow me to deal with the subtleties and intricacies of the theological reflection seminar and record my own reflections of the process and the responses of the students.

**Phase 1:**

I will conduct a focus group with the five participants to whom I will pose a question(s) in each of the following areas: the goal(s) of theological reflection; the theological reflection seminar and integration of the four dimensions of the programme; articulating a theology for ministry; forming and appropriating a ministerial identity and theological reflection seminars in other settings. The focus group will provide an opportunity to explore attitudes and perceptions, feelings and ideas about the theological reflection

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308 Appendix 3.E: *Focus Group Guidelines and Questions.*
seminar. Here the emphasis is placed on the interaction within the group as a means of eliciting information. This phase develops trust, rapport, and a sense of connectedness with the participants while at the same time generating data: “What was important in the seminar for the students and why? In what way did it help them to gain a sense of identity as ecclesial ministers?” The initial method of data collection, it provides a method of investigation in order to find the participants reasoning behind the views and opinions expressed.\(^{309}\) The focus group will provide the material for the questionnaire and the semi-structured interviews as I move from the general to the specific in gathering data.

**Phase 2:**

Following a review of the data from the focus group I will invite the same five participants to complete a written questionnaire of open-ended questions in digital form.\(^{310}\) As in phase 1, the questions will focus on the goal(s) of theological reflection; the theological reflection seminar and integration of the four dimensions of the programme; articulating a theology for ministry; forming and appropriating a ministerial identity and theological reflection seminars in other settings. Information from questionnaires tends to fall into two categories: facts and opinions.\(^{311}\) Here, much of the information will be in the category of opinion. This research method is used so as to elicit more information concerning each of these areas. The questionnaire will be tested prior to actual use to check for problems, such as clarity of meaning in the words used or loaded questions.


\(^{310}\) Appendix 3.F: Questionnaire Guidelines and Questions.

Phase 3:
Following a review and analysis of the questionnaires, I will conduct semi-structured interviews with each of the five participants. I will develop the questions for this interview from information generated from the questionnaires and the focus group. In the research, this provides a final opportunity for the interviewee to express further thoughts on the theological reflection seminar.

Phase 4:
During each of these phases of the action-in-ministry, and until the completion of the research project, I will record my observations, reactions, insights and concerns as field notes in written and recorded memos. This action will enhance my own reflection process and help me to understand how the personal experience of the researcher impacts on the research process. This material will be an additional source of reference for the findings in the research.

Phase 5:
The process of analysis involves the search for things that lie behind the surface content of the data: core elements that explain what it is, how it works and what it achieves. The *Data Analysis Spiral* suggested by Creswell is a process of moving in analytic spirals rather than using a fixed linear approach. This will require a constant back-and-forth process when reviewing the data of the focus group, questionnaire, semi-structured

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314 Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design,* 143.
interviews and the field notes of the researcher. Emerging themes will lead to clarity on
the question asked or to a new discovery of issues in relation to the theological reflection
seminar. Themes will be identified in order to make the links between the categories that
emerge. Salient points will then be categorized under headings. Some of these will be
new categories while others will relate to the subheadings of the research question: the
goal(s) of theological reflection; the integration of the four dimensions of the programme;
the naming and articulating of a theology for ministry; the formation and appropriation of
ministerial identity, and the possibility that the case might offer an example for other
situations to follow the theological reflection seminar. All the material will form an
integral part of the narrative. The final stage of analysis will develop some generalized
conclusions based on the concepts, Pádraigterns and themes that have been identified in
the data. This will consist of a narrative explanation of the findings and how they relate to
the material presented in the literature review.

The process will be validated by sharing the reflections from the analysis with
two group facilitators who have been involved in the seminar to review the findings of
the research. The use of contrasting sources through triangulation and the researcher’s
field notes will help verify that the data are on “the right lines.”315 No research is ever
free from the influence of the researcher – qualitative research is always the product of a
process of interpretation. To balance this, extreme care will be taken to bracket personal
bias as far as possible.

6. **Ethics Review for Research with Human Subjects**

Researchers must be aware of ethical issues that may arise when conducting social research. The key considerations relate to voluntary participation, informed consent, and confidentiality. The letter and form requesting approval from the *Ethics Review Board, University of Toronto* are completed. The research has been approved by the President of St Patrick’s College, and the Dean of the Faculty of Theology, Pontifical University, St Patrick’s College, Maynooth where the theological reflection seminar takes place. All participants will be given clear information on the central purpose of the research. They will be asked to complete a *Consent to Participate Form* before committing to the research procedure and will be free to withdraw from the study at any time. They will be informed about the procedures to be used in data collection and the disposal of the material at the end of the research. They will also be informed that there are no known risks associated with participation in the study. Confidentiality and anonymity will be assured at all times. A pseudonym will be assigned to each participant to protect anonymity. All data will be securely stored, used solely for the purpose of the research and will be shredded/deleted on completion of the Doctorate in Ministry programme in 2012. The researcher owns the rights to the data and the conclusions drawn from them.

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317 Appendix 3.A and 3.B: *Letter of Approval of the Research* from the President, St Patrick’s College and *Letter of Approval of the Site for Research*, the Dean of the Faculty of Theology, St Patrick’s College, Maynooth, Co Kildare, Ireland.
319 Appendix 3.D: *Consent to Participate Form*. 
7. **Risks and Limitations of the Study**

The case study has the disadvantage of being vulnerable to criticism in relation to the “credibility of generalizations made from the findings.” Secondly, there is a perception that case studies produce “soft” data due to the lack of rigour expected in social science research. The question of “power over” is not applicable as the participants have completed the programme and are now in independent employment.

- Extreme attention will be given to detail and rigour in the use of this approach and in demonstrating the extent to which the theological reflection seminar is similar to, or contrasts with, the seminar used in other programmes.
- Participants will be asked to bracket any deference they may have towards me as their former director while on the programme by putting aside any positive or negative experiences they may have had of me, as director, or of the course.
- I will bracket my personal bias on the centrality of the theological reflection seminar by staying focused on the thesis question and subheadings and look directly for the participant’s experience of the reflection seminar.
- Participation in the research presumes a number of skills which include: the ability to recall past experience; the ability to integrate knowledge and experience; an awareness of one’s personal life/faith journey; theological reflection; an understanding of what is meant by ministerial identity; and an ability and willingness to share in a group, which may not be shared by all.
- Different experiences, perceptions and group dynamics could lead to such diverse categories that it may be difficult to draw useful conclusions.

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7. The Contribution of the Study

My hopes are that the research will

- give new insights and affirm the role of theological reflection, especially the theological reflection seminar, in education for ecclesial ministry in the University.
- open up new ways in which the theological reflection seminar could be a more effective tool for formation as students prepare for ministry in Ireland.
- be a resource for other formation programmes for ministry in Ireland and Europe.
- strengthen the argument for the inclusion of “regular, formal and disciplined” theological reflection, especially group reflection, as an integral part of many ecclesial ministries.
Appendix 2. Approval of for the Research from the Ethics Review Board

PROTOCOL REFERENCE # 26566

June 28, 2011

Reverend Joseph G. Schner
Regis College,
Toronto School of Theology
100 Wellesley St. West
Toronto, ON M5S 2Z5

Sr. Brid Liston
Regis College,
Toronto School of Theology
100 Wellesley St. West
Toronto, ON M5S 2Z5

Dear Reverend Schner and Sr. Liston:

Re: Your research protocol entitled, “Theoretical Reflection in Education for Ecclesial Ministry: The Role of Theological Reflection in the Formation and Appropriation of Ministerial Identity”

ETHICS APPROVAL

Original Approval Date: June 28, 2011
Expiry Date: June 27, 2012
Continuing Review Level: 1

We are writing to advise you that the Social Sciences, Humanities and Education Research Ethics Board has granted approval to the above-named research study under the REB’s delegated review process. Your study has been approved for a period of one year and ongoing projects must be renewed prior to the expiry date.

All your most recently submitted documents have been approved for use in this study.

Any changes to the approved protocol or consent materials must be reviewed and approved through the amendment process prior to its implementation. Any adverse or unanticipated events should be reported to the Office of Research Ethics as soon as possible.

Please ensure that you submit an Annual Renewal Form or a Study Completion Report 15 to 30 days prior to the expiry date of your study. Note that annual renewals for studies cannot be accepted more than 30 days prior to the date of expiry, as per federal and international policies.

If your research has funding attached, please contact the relevant Research Funding Officer in Research Services to ensure that your funds are released.

Best wishes for the successful completion of your project.

Yours sincerely,

Dean Sharpe, Ph.D.
Research Ethics Board Manager—Social Sciences and Humanities

OFFICE OF RESEARCH ETHICS
McMurtrie Building, 12 Queen’s Park Crescent West, 2nd Floor, Toronto, ON M5S 3S8 Canada
Tel: +1 416 864-3273 • Fax: +1 416 864-3765 • ethics.review@utoronto.ca • http://www.research.utoronto.ca/for-researchers-administrators/ethics
Appendix 3.
Appendix 3.A: Letter of Approval for the Research, from
The President

Saint Patrick's College, Maynooth
Co. Kildare, Ireland. Tel: +353-1-7083958 Fax: +353-1-708 3959 E-Mail: president@spcrn.ie

PRESIDENT'S OFFICE
Monsignor Hugh Connolly,
BA, DD President

University of Toronto,
Office of Vice-President,
Research Office of Research
Ethics

To the Ethics Committee, Toronto School of Theology "and the University of Toronto.

As President of St Patrick's College, Maynooth, I give formal approval to Brid Liston, Doctorate in Ministry student in the Toronto School of Theology, University of Toronto and a member of the Faculty of Theology, Pontifical -University, St Patrick's College, Maynooth, for the research she is undertaking on "The Role of Theological Reflection in Education for Ecclesial Ministry at St Patrick's College, Maynooth".

I am fully conversant with all the details of the research and her commitment to comply with the requirements of the Ethics Committee of the Toronto School of Theology and the University of Toronto in the work required for the Doctorate in Ministry programme.

Yours sincerely,
Monsignor Hugh G. Connolly
President

Colaiste Phadraig, Ma Nuad, Co. Chill Dara.
Appendix 3. B:  

Letter of Approval for the Location of the Research

Pontifical University  
Saint Patrick's College  
Maynooth,  
Co. Kildare, Ireland.

Faculty of Theology Office  
Tel: +353-1-708 3600/708 3392  
Fax: +353-1-708 3644  
E-Mail: theologioffice@trinity.ie  
Web: www.maynoothcollege.ie

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Appendix B: Letter of Approval for the Location of the Research

To

University of Toronto,  
Office of Vice-President,  
Research Office of Research Ethics

To the Ethics Committee, Toronto School of Theology "and the University of Toronto

As Dean of the Faculty, St Patrick's College, Maynooth, I give full permission to Brid Liston, Doctorate in Ministry student in the Toronto School of Theology, University of Toronto and a member of the Faculty of Theology, Pontifical University, St Patrick’s College, Maynooth, to conduct the research on site in St Patrick’s College, (focus groups, interviews), that she is undertaking on "The Role of Theological Reflection in Education for Ecclesial Ministry at St Patrick's College, Maynooth".

I am fully conversant with all the details of the research and her commitment to comply with the requirements of the Ethics Committee of the Toronto School of Theology and the University of Toronto in the work required for the Doctorate in Ministry programme.

Yours sincerely,

[Signature]

Rev Dr Pádraig Corkery,  
Dean of the Faculty of Theology  
St Patrick's College, Maynooth, Co Kildare.

Coláiste Fhionntraí, Mí Nuad, Co. Chill Dara.
Appendix 3.C: Letter to Graduates Requesting Volunteers to Participate in the Research

Toronto School of Theology
47 Queen’s Park Crescent East,
Toronto, ON M5S 2C3

Dear

I am writing to you to explain a project in which I am involved and secondly to enlist your help in that project.

At present I am working on a doctoral dissertation which proposes to identify the role of the theological reflection process in the Education for Ecclesial Ministry programme in the Pontifical University, St Patrick’s College, Maynooth. I will particularly address this process as it unfolds in the Theological Reflection Seminar/Group. My aim is to identify the experiences of graduates, while they were students in the programme, on the role of the theological reflection seminar and the ways in which it helped them to develop a ministerial identity. In addition, my hope is that the research will open up new ways in which the theological reflection seminar could be a more effective tool for formation as students prepare for ministry in Ireland today.

The outcomes of a student’s experience in the TRS are not abstract ideas but concrete results in the lives of real people who have graduated from the Education for Ecclesial Ministry programme. This is why I need your help. The research will address your experience of the theological reflection process in the programme. In particular the study will look at the weekly meeting of the theological reflection seminar/group as a way of facilitating students to integrate the different dimensions of the programme, in naming an operative theology for ministry and to form and appropriate a ministerial identity. To do this I need you to:

a) participate in a focus group discussion with four other people,
b) answer a questionnaire specially prepared for this research
b) participate in an interview with me as the researcher.

If you choose to take part in this research, I will need your permission to make use of the information that will be generated from these three sources. The focus group and the interviews will be recorded. At no point in the final written report of the study will your name be used. A pseudonym will be assigned to each participant to protect her or his anonymity. While your cooperation with this project would be invaluable to me (without you there would be no project!), should you decide not to take part I will respect completely your decision.

If you think you could participate in this project I would ask you to please sign the attached document. (Appendix 3. D)

Gratefully,
Bríd Liston
Appendix 3.D: Consent to Participate Form

Toronto School of Theology
affiliated with the University of Toronto

47 Queen’s Park Crescent East • Toronto, Ontario, Canada M5S 2C3
Telephone: 416-978-4039 • Fax: 416-978-7821 • Website: www.tStedu

I, a graduate of the Education for Ecclesial Ministry programme in the Pontifical University, St Patrick’s College, Maynooth, Ireland, in 20 and presently engaged in full-time ecclesial ministry, agree to participate in this doctoral project and study conducted by Brid Liston.

The conditions governing my agreement are the following:

a) Confidentiality and anonymity will be assured at all times.

b) Information to be used in the project and research will come from an interview with me, a questionnaire which I will have completed and the findings from a focus group of which I was a member.

c) All identifiable electronic data and recorded material outside of a secure server environment must be encrypted, consistent with the standards described at: http://www.utoronto.ca/security/UTORprotect/encryption_guidelines.htm.

d) I am free to decide not to participate or withdraw at any time without affecting my relationship with you as researcher.

e) All data, including recorded material, will be securely stored, used solely for the purpose of the research and will be shredded and deleted when the study has been approved.

f) Any change in this Consent to Participate Form, whether by way of addition or deletion requires my written consent.

If during your participation in this study you feel the information and guidelines that you were given have been neglected or disregarded in any way, or if you are unhappy about the process, please contact:

The Office of Research Ethics, e mail: ethics.review@utoronto.ca 00 1 416-946-3273.

Dr Andrew Irvine, Director, DMin Programme, Toronto School of Theology, 47 Queen’s Park Crescent East, Toronto, ON M5S 2C3. e mail: andrew.irvine@utoronto.ca 00 1 416 978 4039.

Dr Joseph Schner, Thesis Supervisor, 100 Wellesley St W. Toronto, ON M5S 2 Z5. e mail: joseph.schner@utoronto.ca. Telephone: 001 416 922 5474.

Please be assured that your concerns will be dealt with in a sensitive manner.

A copy of this Consent Form will be given to you to keep.

Name of Participant: ____________________________
Signature of Participant: ____________________________
Signature of Researcher: ____________________________
Date: ____________________________

Members

Emmanuel College – United • Knox College – Presbyterian • Regis College – Roman Catholic, Jesuit • St Augustine’s Seminary – Roman Catholic, Diocesan University of St Michael’s College – Roman Catholic, Basilian • University of Trinity College – Anglican • Wycliffe College – Anglican, Evangelical

affiliates

Conrad Grebel University College – Toronto Mennonite Theological Centre – Mennonite • Huron University College – Anglican Institute for Christian Studies – Reformed • Waterloo Lutheran Seminary – Evangelical Lutheran
Appendix 3.E: Guidelines for the Focus Group

TRS – Theological Reflection Seminar

The Focus Group
The focus group provides an opportunity to understand underlying motives and meanings that explain particular points of view and opinions. It will provide an opportunity to gain a broad feel for the graduate’s experience of the TRS within the Education for Ecclesial Ministry programme. The graduates will have an opportunity to share their thoughts, while also comparing their own contributions to what others have said. This process of sharing and comparing is especially useful for hearing and understanding a range of responses on the theological reflection seminar. It will provide data on what the graduates think, but also on why they think the way they do. The group creates a situation where I can gauge the extent to which there is a level of agreement or disagreement and shared views among the graduates in relation to the theological reflection seminar. The focus group will provide the material for the questionnaire and the interviews.

Role of the Moderator/Facilitator
My role will be to create an atmosphere of trust and introduce a stimulus for a discussion. I will facilitate the discussion by staying focused on the area of the TRS that we are addressing. I will encourage all to take part in the discussion and ensure that nobody feels intimated or left-out of the discussion. I will assure the group of confidentiality of all that will be shared in the focus group and ask them to establish some ground rules before the discussion begins.

The issues that I will address in the focus group are:

- The students experience of the theological reflection seminar
- The goals and methodology of the theological reflection seminar
- The role of the theological reflection seminar and the integration of the different dimensions of the programme
- The role of the theological reflection seminar and the development of an operative theology for ministry
- Forming and appropriating a ministerial identity in the theological reflection seminar.
- Theological reflection and the present ministerial situation of the graduate

Focus Group:

Five graduates of the Education for Ecclesial Ministry programme 2007-2010

Length of the group session: 90 minutes

Place of the interview: To be agreed by all the parties involved

Date of the interview: To be arranged

Recoding: The focus group will be recorded
Appendix 3.E: Continued - Focus Group

Suggested questions to lead the discussion:

1. How would you describe your experience of the theological reflection seminar?
2. What do you see as the goal(s) of the theological reflection seminar?
3. Do you think it achieved these goals?
4. What was the value of the group in the theological reflection seminar?
5. How did the seminar help you to integrate the different elements of the programme, e.g. theory and practice, human and spiritual development?
6. How did the theological reflection seminar help you to name and articulate the theology which underpinned your ministry? (Your theology for ministry).
7. What image, verse from Scripture, text or context describes theological reflection for you?
8. How did participation in the theological reflection seminar help you to form and make your own, a ministerial identity?
9. Do you ever do theological reflection in a group with other colleagues or professionals in other disciplines in your present ministry?
10. What role do you see for group theological reflection in pastoral ministry once a person has graduated from college?
11. Any other reflections or insights about the theological reflection seminar?
Appendix 3.F: Guidelines for the Questionnaire

Questionnaire
Questionnaires rely on written information which is supplied by people in response to questions asked by the researcher. The information from questionnaires tends to fall into two categories: facts and opinions. In this research much of the information will be in the category of opinion.

The strength of the questionnaire is that it will supply standard answers since all the respondents are presented the same questions “with no scope for variation to slip in via face-to-face” with me. It is economical and easy to arrange. The questionnaire also encourages pre-coded answers that fit into the questions that have been asked. It reduces the personal factor and human error involved when transcribing an interview or interpreting the data. There is little scope for the data to be affected by ‘interpersonal factors.’ Since I have had a student-director relationship with the respondents in the past, the data collected is less likely to be contaminated through variations in the manner in which the question is asked.

Questions
By using two types of questions, open and closed, there is room for two different ways of gathering the information required.

The closed question will give a specific response to the categories that I have decided in advance. The main advantage is that the structure imposed on the respondent’s answers provides information “which is of uniform length and in a form that lends itself to being quantified and compared.” In the closed question the respondents do not have to think of how to express their ideas, but have the relatively easy task of needing to pick one/two items from an optional five/six.

Open questions leave the respondent to decide on the wording, the length and the kind of matters to be raised in the answer. The open question is more likely to “reflect the full richness and complexity of the views held by the respondent.”

The issues that I will address in the questionnaire are:

- The aim(s) of theological reflection in the theological reflection seminar
- Integration and theological reflection in the theological reflection seminar
- Theology for ministry in the theological reflection seminar
- Forming and appropriating a ministerial identity in the theological reflection seminar

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**Participants:** Five graduates of the Education for Ecclesial Ministry programme 2006-2010

**Length of time:** At the graduates own discretion, but they will be advised to answer the questions in one session within two hours

**Administration of the questionnaire:**

The graduates will be sent the questionnaire on-line and will be asked to return it on-line within seven days of receipt.

**Date of the questionnaire:** To be arranged between the participant and the researcher

**Recoding:** Each questionnaire will be stored on selected file and deleted on completion of the research.
Appendix 3.F: Continued - Questionnaire – Theological Reflection Seminar

Questionnaire: Part One  Closed Questions

TRS = Theological Reflection Seminar

*Please tick or place some marker as your answer to each question in the appropriate box.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Question</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Aim of TRS</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Is reflection on your ministry something that comes (tick one)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>a. ____ easily</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b. ____ rarely</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>c. ____ regularly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>d. ____ never</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Which of the following did the TRS help you to do (number 1 and 2 in order of priority)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>a. ___ Discern God’s will for you</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b. ___ Identify your assumptions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>c. ___ See how effective your ministry is</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>d. ___ Integrate different parts of the programme</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>e. ___ Identify your bias in situations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>f. ___ Develop a theology for ministry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TRS and Integration</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>The aspect of the TRS that helped you most to integrate the different parts of the programme (Tick one)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>a. ___ Being part of a group discussion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b. ___ Presenting a written paper on a situation/issue you experienced in ministry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>c. ___ Discussing a situation/issue another person presented about their ministry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>d. ___ Identifying the “Heart of the Matter” in ministry situations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>e. ___ Seeing the theological issues involved in a ministry situation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>f. ___ Naming an action</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Theology for Ministry</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>--------------------------</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>4.</strong> Which of the following areas of discussion in the TRS helped you most to develop a sense of your theology for ministry? (Tick one)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| a. ___ Suffering  
| b. ___ Image of God  
| c. ___ Model of the Church  
| d. ___ Human development seminars  
| e. ___ Liturgy and sacraments  
| f. ___ Injustice to people |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Ministerial Identity</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>5.</strong> Which two of the following functions of ministry that were discussed in the TRS gave you a good sense of your identity as a pastoral minister? (Number 1, 2 in order of priority)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| a. ___ Ministry of Teaching  
| b. ___ Communicating the Good News/Preaching  
| c. ___ Prayer and worship  
| d. ___ Pastoral care  
| e. ___ Social mercy and justice  
| f. ___ Leadership and administration |

| **6.** Which of the following did the TRS help you to see as an integral part of being an ecclesial minister (Tick one) |
| a. ___ God’s presence to others  
| b. ___ Obligation to present the teachings of the Church  
| c. ___ Be a good listener and be compassionate  
| d. ___ Communicate the gospel message  
| e. ___ Meet people where they are  
| f. ___ God is always present even if we are not aware of God’s presence |

The following phrases were used by students to describe the TRS  
(Circle or tick the number – 1 least important, 4 most important, that you agree with)  

| **7.** Provides peer supervision of ministry? |
| **8.** Develops a reflective approach to ministry? |
| **9.** Integrates feelings, thoughts and actions in the student about ministry? |
| **10.** Helps students articulate why they are doing what they are doing? |
| **11.** Gives students a sense of who they are in ministry? |
Questionnaire - Part Two  Open Questions

TRS = Theological Reflection Seminar

*Please answer the question in the box beneath it, as it will expand to allow for the amount of space required for your response.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Question</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Goals and Methodology</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>What do you understand by reflection?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>What conditions help you to be a more reflective person in ministry?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>What do you understand by theology and the wisdom of the tradition?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>What do you see as the goal(s) of theological reflection as it unfolds in the Theological Reflection Seminar (TRS)?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>What was the value for you as a pastoral minister in being part of a group for theological reflection?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>What was the value of others writing and reading their theological reflection paper in the group?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>How valuable was it for you to write your theological reflection paper and present it in a group?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>What is the role of the facilitator in group theological reflection?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Integration</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>In what way(s) has the TRS, enabled you to integrate the four areas of the programme: personal development, personal faith journey, academic theology, and experience in pastoral ministry?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>How has the TRS helped you to think contextually and pastorally in pastoral ministry?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>How has the TRS help you to think with scripture, and the tradition in your mind and heart when you are engaged in ministry?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.</td>
<td>How does the TRS help you to make connections between who you, you’re your own personal faith and practice in pastoral ministry?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Theology for Ministry</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. What do you understand by the phrase, “an operative theology for ministry?”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. What verse, phrase or image best describes your theology for ministry?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. In what way(s) has the TRG helped you articulate an operative theology for ministry (the theology out of which you minister)?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Ministerial Identity</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>16. What do you understand by ministerial identity?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. How has your operative theology for ministry, as you developed it through theological reflection, helped you to form a ministerial identity?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. How have the goals you outlined in question 4 contributed to your sense of who you are in ministry?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. Were any of these goals unhelpful for you in developing a ministerial identity?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20. Overall, how has theological reflection, as you experienced it in the theological reflection seminar helped you to form and appropriate (take for yourself) a ministerial identity?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Theological Reflection Seminar as an example for other situations in ministry</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>21. What are the limitations of the TRS? How do you suggest these might be addressed?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22. What suggestions would you make for the theological reflection seminar as part of the formation for ministry programme?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23. In addition to its value in the <em>Formation for Ecclesial Ministry</em> programme, would group theological reflection be valuable for you in your present ministry situation?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24. Why is it so difficult to do group theological reflection while actively engaged in full-time pastoral ministry?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25. Any other comments/suggestions you would like to make about TRG within the <em>Education for Ecclesial Ministry</em> programme now that you look back on it?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix 3.G: Semi-Structured Interviews

The semi-structured interview
The semi-structured interview in research provides an opportunity to gain insights into people’s opinions, feelings, emotions and experiences. In this research, the interview will give privileged information from the graduates of the programme who have been involved in the theological reflection seminar. While I will have some set questions (outlined below) to direct the conversation. I will be flexible in terms of order of the questions and let the interviewee develop ideas and speak more widely on the issues that will be raised.

The issues that I will address in the interview are:

- Theology for ministry in the theological reflection seminar
- Forming and appropriating a ministerial identity in the theological reflection seminar
- Theological reflection and the present ministerial situation of the graduate

Interviewees: Five graduates of the Education for Ecclesial Ministry programme between 2006-2010

Length of the interview: 40 minutes

Place of the interview: At a site agreed by the participant and the researcher

Date of the interview: To be arranged

Recoding: Each interview will be recorded and deleted on completion of the research
Appendix 3.G: Continued - Semi-Structured Interviews

**TRS = Theological Reflection Seminar**

Acknowledging that the graduates have already completed a Questionnaire on the TRS and the development of ministerial identity, the interview will give the participants a chance to add any further thoughts and reflections on these areas.

The interview will also focus on whether TRS is part of their lives in their present ministry situation?

**Guiding Questions for the one-to-one interview:**

*General:*

1. Does the data analysis/narrative from the focus group and the questionnaire include your ideas on the theological reflection seminar?
2. Is there anything further that you wish to have included in the research on the theological reflection seminar?
3. What do you understand by theological reflection?
4. As an ecclesial minister today in the Church in Ireland, what is it that helps you to develop and hold your ministerial identity?
5. How can the theological reflection seminar help form a ministerial identity in students to prepare them for ministry in the Church in Ireland today?
6. What advice would you give to a person beginning the Education for Ecclesial Ministry Programme today?
7. What suggestions would you make to the people in charge of the Education for Ecclesial Ministry Programme today?

*Present Ministerial Situation:*

8. How would you describe your identity as an ecclesial minister at this time?
9. Over the last few years you have been in full-time ecclesial ministry. Would you like to share some thoughts on group theological reflection and ecclesial ministry today?
10. Has group theological reflection ever been part of your ministry?
11. Now that you look back on your time as a student, are there any comments/suggestions you would like to make about TRS within the Education for Ecclesial Ministry programme that would have been valuable to you in ministry?
12. Is there anything else that you wish to add to the topic, comments or suggestions?