

**“Practice-ing” a New Educational Strategy:
Developing a Program for Non-Traditional, Pre-Seminary Students¹**

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Since at least the 1970s, the University of Dubuque has had a unique program designed for people who sense later in life that they are being called to ordained ministry, but who lack an undergraduate degree that would enable them to apply directly to a seminary for a master of divinity degree. Because UD has both a college and a seminary, we have created what we call the “3/3 Program” for non-traditional students, which allows them to earn both a bachelor’s and a master of divinity degree in six years, rather than the normal seven. Typically, these 3/3 students face a variety of challenges as they return to college to prepare for ministry, such as readjusting to academic study, dealing with family and work obligations during their studies, and beginning to think theologically about their future ministry. Unfortunately, UD has not had a systematic program to support 3/3 students during their first three years as undergraduates to better equip them for their future theological studies and ministry activities.² In order to address this need, I recently applied for and received a grant from the Valparaiso Project to develop a practice-based approach, grounded in the Christian tradition,³ to serve our 3/3 students while

¹ I would like to thank Teresa Bartlett, Christoffer Heindel, Jason Price, Alfred Reams, and Benjamin Rocke for valuable feedback they provided on this paper. I would also like to thank my wife, Ruth Jeffries, for her invaluable editorial assistance.

² The University of Dubuque Theological Seminary (UDTS) recently revised their curriculum and instituted what they call “spiritual formation groups” for all of their entering students, which includes a one-credit course component. These spiritual formation groups are designed to provide various forms of support to students, including regular meetings during their first year in seminary. Although UDTS tries to include 3/3 students in some of its more public activities (i.e., lectures, chapels, social events, etc.), scheduling challenges between the differing seminary and college academic calendars makes participation difficult for undergraduate 3/3 students.

³ My use of the phrase “the Christian tradition” rather than the more accurate phrase, “Christian traditions,” is primarily one of style and convenience. While I recognize that there are many different traditions within the Christian religion, using the plural seemed to introduce a more complicated nomenclature. Hence, throughout the paper I will use the singular “Christian tradition.”

they are undergraduates. This essay will examine the rationale for and development of this new program.

I will first describe the challenges faced by our 3/3 students as they prepare for the transition **from** (and sometimes **to**) undergraduate course work **to** seminary study. Second, I will examine the concept of a “practice” generally and certain Christian practices specifically, as well as exploring how these practices can be useful to non-traditional students in this early phase of their academic studies. Third, I will describe the integrated activities of our “Practicing Our Faith” program, including a small support group that meets throughout the academic year, a religion course (co-listed in both the college and the seminary), and a retreat. Each element of our program is aimed at helping these students more deeply understand and integrate Christian practices into their life and ministry. Finally, I will provide a preliminary assessment of our program and suggest how such strategies might be applied to other pre-professional programs.

I. The Challenges of a Later-in-Life Call

When a person makes a decision to pursue a career later in life that demands both an undergraduate and a graduate degree, she can face numerous challenges. Apart from brushing up their academic skills, many non-traditional students must also consider several other issues—moving to a new location, changing their lifestyle, juggling family obligations, and pursuing new job possibilities. These issues are not necessarily unique to students pursuing a call to ministry; however, there are some rather interesting ways we have seen students wrestle with these issues in our 3/3 Program at the University of Dubuque.

Consider the story of Jim, an Iowa farmer for almost 20 years, who senses God is calling him to leave his farm and become a pastor.⁴ He has worked on his family farm since graduating from high school, so he has no college course work. In our program Jim would face six years of academic study. His first three years will be focused on undergraduate courses that include a background in the liberal arts and a major (most likely religion) in order to prepare him for graduate study. During his fourth year at UD, Jim will begin his first of three years of study at the University of Dubuque Theological Seminary.⁵

Imagine facing six years of serious academic work when it has been 15 or 20 years since you have done any academic study at all. In some cases, these non-traditional students did not have strong academic skills in high school. The thought of re-cultivating (or cultivating for the first time) skills in math, science, or a second language can be a daunting task. A ten-page research paper can seem as much a mystery as trying to understand the complexities of the IRS tax code. While these students bring wonderful life experiences to their studies, they often find undergraduate academic work challenging, let alone being ready to do graduate level work in three short years.

Beyond the need to develop academic skills, these non-traditional students face social issues in the classroom. For instance, they are often in classes with fellow students the same age as their children. When they go to the Academic Support Center for assistance, their peer tutor may only be a few years out of high school. It can be a humbling experience for people who have led sometimes highly successful lives in other occupations to be sitting next to students who, in other circumstances, they might be training in a business setting. For example, one 3/3

⁴ The names and examples in this essay have been changed and/or are composites of actual students from our 3/3 Program at UD.

⁵ At the end of a student's fourth year as an undergraduate (which would also be the end of the student's first year of seminary study), he or she would be awarded a bachelor of arts degree. After the student completes the final two years in the seminary, he or she would then be awarded a master of divinity degree.

student was a vice-president in a small Iowa community bank before she started taking classes with 18- and 19-year-olds at UD, whom she might have been responsible for training as tellers in her previous work.

These issues, while sometimes the most obvious challenges non-traditional students face, are certainly not the only ones, or even the most important ones. Most of our 3/3 students have to move to Dubuque in order to pursue such a lengthy course of study. Many of them are from the Midwest, but some have come from as far away as Florida, South Carolina, Arizona, and even the Marshall Islands. Even a three-hour move from a more urban area like Chicago to Dubuque (pop. about 58,000) poses issues of adjustment for students and their families. Often these 3/3 students lose the support structures of family and friends they had in their previous places of residence, which hurts their ability to cope with the new trials they face.

Another important issue that affects these non-traditional students is the necessary lifestyle changes brought on by their decision to leave their previous vocation. In some cases, a non-working spouse makes a decision to return to school, which requires the family to rethink their respective responsibilities for childcare and work. In other cases, when a spouse who is the primary wage earner decides to return to school, his or her family may face a dramatically different financial outlook. For example, one 3/3 student left a well-paying job in law enforcement and another left a position as a senior information technology executive at a global corporation to take student pastor positions while in school, earning significantly less than their previous salaries. The decision to return to school can have a significant impact on a spouse, who sometimes has to reenter the work force, and on families, who must adjust to having less money than they were used to having. Even financially successful and prudent 3/3 students still

find themselves struggling, emotionally if not financially, with the sacrifices their families must make as they pursue their academic and vocational goals.

Finally, many 3/3 students also have additional obligations related to their preparation for ministry. Throughout their studies they must maintain formal relationships with their denominational body. In some cases, 3/3 students are placed as student pastors serving in actual congregations, even at the beginning of their undergraduate studies (yes, that means they are serving as pastors before they have started their professional training to be pastors). Often these students are placed in small congregations that make significant demands of these student pastors, occasionally because the congregations themselves are in some way dysfunctional. Trying to juggle a student pastoral position—which entails constant obligations to perform funerals, hospital visits, counseling, and other traditional pastoral responsibilities, on top of the demands of being students themselves—creates a pressure-filled environment for our 3/3 students. It may be difficult for a student pastor to tell a parishioner they cannot meet to plan a family funeral because she or he has a paper due for class the next morning.⁶ Although non-traditional, pre-seminary students in our 3/3 Program confront many issues common to other non-traditional students, the added pressure of preparing for graduate study and trying to balance denominational and pastoral obligations creates unique stresses on these students.

In previous years, UD did not have a consistent way to nurture our undergraduate 3/3 students. Often encouragement came from their faculty advisers or when they haphazardly connected with another 3/3 student in a class. Over the last few years, however, we have tried to consider ways to serve the unique needs of these students and to better prepare these students for

⁶ I am not suggesting that a 3/3 student would make such a decision. However, 3/3 students often find themselves in such “no-win” situations. Either she tells the family they will have to wait, which may upset them and could hurt the student pastor’s position within her congregation, or she tells her instructor that her paper will be late, which may have serious consequences for her academic progress. Both decisions have a cost.

their future lives in seminary and in ordained ministry. The process that led us to come up with a program currently in place to serve our 3/3 students resulted from a grant proposal we developed, based on the cultivation of a variety of “practices” used to cultivate the Christian faith within religious communities.

II. ‘Practice’-ing One’s Way to Deepening Religious Faith

Over the last twenty-five years, two streams of intellectual reflection have flowed together to produce a renewed interest in the actual practices used by religious communities, and especially the Christian community, to cultivate religious faith among their adherents. One stream emerged from the philosophical world and its increasing interest in virtue theory. A central figure in the contemporary renaissance of the philosophical study of the virtues is Alasdair MacIntyre. His book, *After Virtue*, was an important catalyst behind the recent explosion of philosophical analysis on the nature of and inter-relationship among such concepts as practices, virtues, narratives, and traditions.⁷

Another stream that emerged at roughly the same time within Christian communities, especially in Protestant and evangelical circles, was an increased interest in exploring the use of the Christian disciplines for nurturing one’s faith. An important text that helped ignite this renewed concern for the Christian disciplines was Richard Foster’s *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth*.⁸ By using the spiritual disciplines to cultivate spiritual renewal, many Christians were reawakening to the realization that faith needed to be more than just assent

⁷ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory (2nd Edition)*, Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984. The first edition was published in 1981.

⁸ Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth*, San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978. Recently a 25th anniversary edition of this book has been published, indicating that it continues to be an important resource for reflection on this topic.

to particular beliefs or creeds. Rather, the life of faith is formed by how people implicitly and explicitly choose to live out their everyday lives.

In this section of my essay, I will examine some features of these two intellectual streams as they have shaped the current interest in the Christian practices. I will then use the *Valparaiso Project on the Education and Formation of People in Faith* as an illustrative application of the Christian practices. In discussing the Valparaiso Project, I will explain how I became aware of this effort and how these Christian practices can serve the needs of our undergraduate 3/3 students.

In *After Virtue*, MacIntyre argues that the language used in moral philosophy has been disconnected from the various intellectual frameworks and cultural activities from which such language first emerged. This disconnection between the language of moral philosophy and the practices from which this language arose has resulted in an era in which numerous moral issues appear irresolvable. MacIntyre also developed a constructive defense of an Aristotelian moral theory of virtues as a way to overcome these problems of contemporary moral philosophy. It is beyond the scope of this paper to provide detailed analysis of MacIntyre's philosophical critique of contemporary moral philosophy or his defense of Aristotelian moral theory. I do, however, want to examine his understanding of the role practices play in a particular tradition.

MacIntyre's concept of a practice is an important tool for helping members of a tradition appreciate how some of the activities within their tradition actually are the very practices that also constitute their tradition.

MacIntyre's analysis suggests a close relationship among virtues, practices, and traditions. Virtues are manifest in the pursuit of excellence in a given practice. Because practices are tied to more complex activities that have internal goods that can evolve over time,

practices are typically involved in the support of traditions. Some of these inter-relationships can be seen by examining MacIntyre's definition of a practice. According to MacIntyre, a practice is:

. . . any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended. Tic-tac-toe is not an example of a practice in this sense, nor is throwing a football with skill; but the game of football is, and so is chess. Bricklaying is not a practice; architecture is. Planting turnips is not a practice; farming is. So are enquiries of physics, chemistry, and biology, and so is the work of the historian, and so are painting and music. In the ancient and medieval worlds the creation and sustaining of human communities—of households, cities, nations—is generally taken as a practice in the sense in which I have defined it. Thus, the range of practices is wide: arts, sciences, games, politics in the Aristotelian sense, the making and sustaining of family life, all fall under the concept.⁹

For MacIntyre, practices are activities that, while certainly having technical elements, more importantly provide the internal goods that allow the practices to serve wider goals of human flourishing. Practices have histories and trajectories that, over time, evolve in such a way that standards of excellence and the virtues necessary to produce such excellence are, to some extent, dynamic. When one is engaged in the pursuit of a practice, and one exemplifies the virtues necessary for excellence in the practice, one also must realize that the practice is part of a larger

⁹ MacIntyre, pp. 187-88.

tradition. In a way, virtues are to practices what practices are to traditions. Practices help create and sustain the traditions out of which they arise.

This understanding of practices is important for at least two reasons. First, MacIntyre's analysis should force us to more self-consciously explore the formative "practices" that are at work in the various disciplinary processes of formation. We are being "disciplined" within our various academic disciplines (or professions). For example, in the training of future faculty that occurs in graduate school, I believe it is critical to explore the implicit and explicit ways in which research practices are "privileged" in comparison to teaching and service practices. If we want to have excellent instruction at the post-secondary level, we must find constructive ways to nurture pedagogical practices more deeply throughout the graduate school process.¹⁰ Second, MacIntyre's understanding of practices is also important because it can illuminate the inter-relationship between Christian practices and the Christian tradition, and the way it has been appropriated by some of the proponents of the Christian practices.

Throughout much, if not all, of its history the Christian tradition has been tied to a variety of Christian practices. In light of this fact, it is not surprising to find a periodic renewal of interest in the practices activities that have been instrumental in sustaining Christian communities of faith. The enthusiastic reception with which Richard Foster's *Celebration of Discipline* was greeted in the late 70's and early 80's marks just such a renewal. Foster used the term "discipline" to reflect what he took to be the "classical" approach to activities historically considered "*central* to experiential Christianity [emphasis in original]."¹¹ His explication of the disciplines had three major divisions: the inward disciplines (meditation, prayer, fasting, and

¹⁰ I use this example from my own area of expertise and experience. However, I am very much aware of recent trends in higher education that have tried to take on this very issue. Programs like Preparing Future Faculty are designed to address these questions of improving educational pedagogy. Nevertheless, there is room for additional improvement.

¹¹ Foster, p. 1.

study), the outward disciplines (simplicity, solitude, submission, and service), and the corporate disciplines (confession, worship, guidance, and celebration). He urged Christians to see the disciplines as essential tools to help liberate them from those things that could be barriers to experiencing the “inner righteousness [that] is a gift from God to be graciously received.”¹² I am appealing to Foster here primarily as a representative example of a broader interest across many different parts of the Christian tradition, although some parts of the Christian tradition didn’t need “renewing” of their commitment to the Christian disciplines because these practices have been central to their spiritual lives for centuries. Nevertheless, Foster represented a significant contemporary attempt to bring the Christian disciplines to a wider audience. He argued that the disciplines were not only for those called to a life that might entail a more “serious” spirituality (i.e., pastors, members of spiritual communities, mystics, etc.), but also for those who lived “everyday” lives.

A more recent example of trying to bring a “practice-based” approach to Christian faith is the Valparaiso Project on the Education and Formation of People in Faith. The Valparaiso Project is “a project whose purpose is to develop resources to help contemporary people live the Christian faith with vitality and integrity in changing times. The Project is ecumenical in orientation and appreciative of the legacies of a range of Christian traditions.”¹³

The Valparaiso Project uses the language of “practices” to describe the various activities they seek to cultivate. Their use of the concept of practices is grounded in MacIntyre’s theory of practices discussed above.¹⁴ Those involved in the Valparaiso Project seek to explore how particular activities can help further both the individual and the collective work of living out

¹² Foster, p. 5.

¹³ http://www.practicingourfaith.org/who_valpo.html

¹⁴ Dorothy Bass and Craig Dykstra, “Times of Yearning, Practices of Faith,” Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People, Dorothy Bass (ed.), San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997. See the notes to their essay on p. 205.

one's faith in the everyday circumstances of life. In their explication of a practice, they identify four important features that guide their understanding:

- Practices address fundamental human needs and conditions through concrete human acts.
- Practices are done together and over time.
- Practices provide standards of excellence.
- Practices help us perceive how our daily lives are all tangled up with the things God is doing in the world.¹⁵

To be engaged in a life of faith is to be shaped by both the practices of the church and the practices of our daily routines. The central concern for people of faith becomes the ongoing dialectical interaction between our pursuit of the excellences embodied in our practices and our being formed by these practices as individuals and the wider Christian community.

There are twelve practices the Valparaiso Project is committed to supporting. These include: honoring the body, hospitality, household economics, saying yes and saying no, keeping Sabbath, testimony, discernment, shaping communities, forgiveness, healing, dying well, and singing our lives.¹⁶ As one can see from even a brief examination of this list, these practices range over individual and corporate activities; sometimes a practice is both. In fact, I believe that they all have individual and social dimensions. This list challenges us not to divide our lives between the “sacred” and the “secular.” So, for example, in order to make space in one's life for hospitality or Sabbath, a person may also need to learn to say “no” to letting his work encroach on evenings and weekends. A person may need to think about how the practice of forgiveness

¹⁵ Bass and Dykstra, pp. 6-8.

¹⁶ Two places provide valuable introductions to these practices as they are understood by the Valparaiso Project. First, their website, www.practicingourfaith.org, has helpful sketches for each of these practices, along with a wealth of resources that can be used for further study and exploration. Second, the book edited by Dorothy Bass cited earlier, *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People*, has a chapter on each of these twelve practices written by different authors from different Christian traditions.

should affect her reactions not only to those in her religious community, but also to the person who performed a faulty house inspection that resulted in the need to make several thousand dollars in unexpected repairs. As we grow in our understanding of these practices, we find them reaching more deeply into the totality of our lives.

In addition to providing invaluable conceptual resources on the Christian practices, the Valparaiso Project provides grants to people and organizations that are seeking to live out these practices in concrete ways. I became aware of the Project when my university offered me the opportunity to develop a proposal for a Valparaiso Project Grant. I immediately thought this would be a wonderful way to develop a program to help our 3/3 students address some of the challenges they face.

What I found particularly attractive was how the Christian practices outlined by the Valparaiso Project were related to vitally important tasks a student and pastor needs to learn in order to be a faithful servant of the church. Some practices seemed to be particularly apt. For example, thinking about the implications of one's household economics could be a useful tool for many of the 3/3 students adjusting to living on significantly lower incomes. Exploring issues surrounding questions of simplicity and global economic justice may provide students and their families with creative strategies for "living more with less."

Managing one's time and commitments is also important for our 3/3 students. The sooner students are able to learn the value of taking regular Sabbaths, the more likely they will be able to avoid bouts of burnout. More importantly, being a pastor, like many other professions, is a calling that can lead to a seemingly infinite number of legitimate demands. Learning to cultivate discernment and the ability to say both yes and, more vitally, **no**, are essential to cultivating a strategic and healthy ministry.

Embracing hospitality, especially reaching out to the traditional 18- to 22-year-old students, will be a valuable way for the 3/3 students to learn about the very people they will be seeking to reach in their own congregations. As 3/3 students, they have a natural opportunity to learn how these young students think and approach their lives. Rarely again will these 3/3 students have such a natural context to get close to young people so they can learn how they might create hospitable spaces in their future congregations for this generation. The very life of those congregations will depend on the extent to which churches can bring in new generations of people of faith.

The last practice I would like to discuss briefly is that of shaping communities. In a certain sense, this practice is at the very center of the life of a minister. If we can help our 3/3 students learn how to think strategically in terms of congregational development, then we will better equip them to serve the Christian community. Helping students examine the role of vision in their pastoral work will help them make more strategic choices in their work with churches. Of course, vision can be a difficult gift, since those who have the capacity to be visionary will always be able to envision more things than can possibly be done in any day, week, month, year, or even lifetime. Here, again, discernment is essential to know which avenues to pursue and which ones to let go. Moreover, helping the 3/3 students see the central role that Christian practices can have in cultivating such community will enable them to ground their plans in activities that will deepen the faith of the congregations with which they have been entrusted.

Clearly much more could be said about each of these twelve Christian practices in relation to how they might apply to the 3/3 students at the University of Dubuque. Much, if not all, of the content surrounding these practices is immediately applicable to our 3/3 students at this early stage in their development as ministers. However, beyond the value of the theological

and practical content of these practices, there is also a critical methodological reason for trying to cultivate these practices earlier. By starting the process of “habituation” (to use a term common to an Aristotelian approach to the virtues) earlier in the lives of these students, they stand a better chance of having these practices become formative in their academic and pastoral work, as well as their personal spiritual journeys. If we can cultivate these practices in our students as undergraduates, they will be much more prepared for deeper theological reflection on these practices when they move on to the seminary and beyond. For that reason, I sought to create a program for our 3/3 students that would introduce them to these Christian practices and allow them space to “practice” them.

III. Practicing Our Faith for Non-Traditional, Pre-Seminary Students—A UD Program

In order to better serve the needs of our 3/3 students, we have designed a program that focuses on those Christian practices identified by the Valparaiso Project. Our program includes both co-curricular and curricular elements, and the grant allows for small financial stipends to encourage and reward student participation. The initial phase of our project will run two years. During that time we hope to demonstrate to the students the value of integrating the Christian practices into their academic work, ministry activities, and personal lives.

The central component to our program is a weekly small group meeting open to all the current undergraduate 3/3 students. I am the main facilitator of the group, but I have also recruited a 3/3 student who is in the second year of his theological studies in the seminary. The logic of using a more advanced 3/3 student as a co-facilitator is that he is able to more effectively speak to the concerns of current 3/3 undergraduate students since he was in their place only a

few years earlier. Equally important, however, is the need to model how to share leadership and how to train new leaders to lead small groups.

This past fall semester we met on Thursday afternoons from 4:30 until 5:45. Our meetings typically had three parts. At the outset of our meetings, we had a time of sharing about how our week was going. Typically our discussions focused on how the students were doing in their academic work; however, discussions also covered aspects of their ministry work and their personal lives. The second part of our meetings revolved around discussions of the book, *Practicing Our Faith*. Each week we discussed a chapter on one of the twelve Christian practices. We tried to ground our discussions in the reality of the students' lives and experiences, not merely abstract theological reflections on the practices. The final part of our meeting was usually a time of prayer using various forms of prayer—group, one-to-one, silent, and reading a written prayer.

Based on mid-year evaluations, the students found the small group a valuable addition to their experience at UD. They have enjoyed the more serious and sustained reflection on the Christian practices. Many of our discussions have been transformed into sermons that have been preached in the congregations served by our students. These students are already starting to think how our reflections on the Christian practices might yield valuable insights into the practices of pastoral ministry. Students have also reported that the group has served as a valuable bonding experience. Some of our 3/3 students who were on campus last year before we began this program noted that the group has been an invaluable addition. They have gotten to know other 3/3 students more quickly and have found more opportunities to connect outside of the small group.

This semester, our group is continuing its weekly meetings, this time on Monday mornings. We are focusing on developing strategies to personally apply some of the Christian practices we have studied. We will also consider strategies that can help create small groups in churches to work on living out these Christian practices. One other feature of our group this spring will be a mission project to work on together.

Another way in which we are trying to “live out” these practices is by exercising hospitality. During the fall semester, my wife and I hosted a dinner for all the 3/3 students and their families. Gathering in a more informal setting with spouses and children proved a fun way to get to know each other more deeply. We plan to have additional gatherings during the spring semester, and possibly through the summer.

Since our 3/3 small group serves a variety of purposes, our discussions of the Christian practices have been only “introductory.” I thought it would be useful to have a classroom context to enter into deeper, more sustained study of the Christian practices. Furthermore I thought other students might benefit from studying the Christian practices, as well. Therefore, I developed a religion “topics” course titled, “History and Theology of Christian Practices,” being offered this semester.

This course is designed to explore the history, theology, and ethical implications of the Christian practices, as well as how to educate people about these practices—both ourselves personally and the communities in which we are involved. The course is divided into three major sections. In the first part, we examine the history of how Christian and Jewish communities have used practices in the spiritual formation of their followers. Second, we study the relationship between theology and the practices of Christian communities. Finally, in the third part we focus on how to educate the contemporary Christian community in these Christian

practices. Each part of the course has a text related to it.¹⁷ In addition to our readings, students are going to be writing research papers for the course focusing on a single Christian practice. At the end of the semester, we will have seventeen different papers on various Christian practices. I plan to copy all the papers and distribute them to the entire class, providing each student a mini-resource library on the practices so they can continue to explore them in the future.

The course is cross-listed in the Philosophy and Religion Department and the Seminary. Currently, nine 3/3 students, five “regular” undergraduate religion majors, and three seminary students are enrolled in the course. This mix of different students makes for fascinating discussions. The course is run in a seminar format and meets for three hours on Monday afternoons.¹⁸ Students keep a reading journal to reflect on the ideas raised in our weekly readings. These observations are the starting point for our class discussions. Based on early student feedback and evaluation, the course has been well received and the students have enjoyed learning about how these practices have been cultivated over time. I anticipate that we will offer this course on a regular basis, especially if it proves to be helpful to a wider student population than just our 3/3 undergraduate students.

The final major piece of this 3/3 program will be a retreat we plan to hold in August for returning and new undergraduate 3/3 students. The goal of this retreat is twofold. First, we hope to involve the current 3/3 students in the planning of the retreat, so they will have an opportunity to think about how they might integrate the various Christian practices into an event for a new group of students. Thus, they will begin to take more ownership in the “shaping” of their

¹⁷ The three books we use for the course are: John Van Engen (ed.), [Educating People of Faith: Exploring the History of Jewish and Christian Communities](#); Miroslav Volf and Dorothy C. Bass (eds.), [Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life](#); and Craig Dykstra, [Growing in the Life of Faith: Education and Christian Practices](#). See the attached bibliography for more details on these texts.

¹⁸ This rather long class period is due to trying to find a time that would enable seminary students to join the class, since they often have completely filled class schedules from Tuesday through Thursday.

community and will have the opportunity to apply what they have previously learned about the Christian practices. Second, we want the retreat to provide an initial opportunity of bonding and sharing of collective wisdom between experienced 3/3 students and those who are just starting. We hope the retreat will result in the new students seeing the value of meeting with the returning students in the small group throughout the coming academic year.

Admittedly, we are still in the early stages of this program to improve the 3/3 undergraduate students' educational experience, but the preliminary results have been very promising. The students who have been involved in the project have reported that the group has been a valuable addition to their academic, professional, and personal development. They have become more reflective about some of the practices that are central to their future vocation in ordained pastoral ministry. They have also found mutual support in their regular academic work. Furthermore, they have forged important relationships with other undergraduate students that, in turn, will likely lead to helpful collaborative efforts in the wider student population. In light of the ways in which this new program has helped our 3/3 undergraduate students, we hope that it will become an ongoing part of our larger effort to help these non-traditional, pre-seminary students pursue their callings to ordained ministry.

IV. A Model for Other Professional Programs

Given some of the trends in both higher education and the work world in the twenty-first century, I suspect there will be a growing need for programs similar to our 3/3 program for non-traditional, pre-seminary students. An increasing commitment to "lifelong learning" means that we may have students coming into our academic programs at many different stages of their lives. One can imagine a time when the phrase "non-traditional student" will drop out of usage because

more students will enter higher education who are beyond the 18- to 22-year-old “traditional” timeframe. Moreover, there is an increasing push for ever higher levels of education—as the continually increasing number of master’s and doctoral degrees seems to suggest. Many professions one used to be able to pursue with a bachelor’s degree are now requiring a master’s degree. For example, teaching licensure programs are now moving to the master’s level rather than allowing students to teach with a bachelor’s degree. With ever-increasing professional standards, people will have to be taking courses throughout their adult lives, especially in certain professional careers.

From the standpoint of the employment situation, we are in a time of significant transition. Few people in today’s workforce expect that they will be in the same line of work, let alone with the same company, for their entire working lives. Factors such as technological innovation and globalization have forced many people to change jobs—willingly or unwillingly—at different points in their careers. People are realizing they have to be prepared to retool themselves with new skill sets and even new professions.

In light of this dynamic environment, I believe we will need more programs to help non-traditional students entering education that will allow them to complete both undergraduate and graduate courses of study. Some of the strategies we at UD have adopted may prove useful not only to other schools seeking to prepare non-traditional students for ministry, but also to schools trying to develop programs for non-traditional students entering other professional disciplines—such as health professions, law, business, education, and social services, to name just a few.

First, it is important to bring these students together in a co-curricular setting. Such a context enables non-traditional students to share about their experiences—both the good and the bad—as they seek to navigate all the changes. Sharing a mutual challenge typically serves as a

powerful catalyst for creating a bonding experience. More importantly, a co-curricular setting allows non-traditional students to share ideas on how they can deal wisely with some of the more personal issues they are facing as they enter (or re-enter) the world of higher education.

Second, cultivating a program that encourages non-traditional students to reflect on the practices central to their new professions will better serve not only the students but also the professions they are entering. Students can be challenged to think more strategically about how they might use their undergraduate studies as a means to prepare for their future professional programs. They can also begin to think about the ways in which their professions are shaped by practices, and, in turn, how those practices may be at work trying to shape them as students—either explicitly or implicitly. Through this process of cultivating critical engagement with one's profession, programs for non-traditional, pre-professional students will help create more thoughtful members within the respective professional communities and, as a result, may help these communities find new ideas for improving their practices.

Third, if such programs involve more advanced students to help guide the new students, students discover that becoming a member of a profession entails obligations to nurture new members of that profession. The new students can also see that other students who have been in their position only a few short years before have gone on to have success at the next level of professional study. For non-traditional students who face several years of study, such models can be a source of real encouragement.

The preliminary success of our 3/3 program for non-traditional, pre-seminary students has resulted from reflecting on the Christian practices, especially in relation to a vocation of pastoral ministry. We have not only provided a context for students to be personally supported but have also given them important content to reflect on in their preparation for a life of service

in the church. This model may be valuable both to those seeking to serve non-traditional, pre-seminary students, as well as those seeking to serve the growing number of non-traditional students entering other pre-professional courses of study.

**Christian Practices
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Also see the website, www.practicingourfaith.org, for additional resources on practices for people of faith, including book titles, sermons, bibliographies, educational resources, and project ideas. This excellent website is maintained by the *Valparaiso Project on the Education and Formation of People in Faith*.