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Austin Carty Date

The Pastor-Reader:
How a Program of Regular Reading Is Formational for Practicing Ministers

By

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Abstract

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How a Program of Regular Reading Is Formational for Practicing Ministers
By Austin Carty

Many practicing ministers neglect general reading under the belief that such reading is a luxury, not a vocational responsibility. However, research into the formational capacity of reading demonstrates that ministers do well to read widely and curiously, as general reading forms the minister's person and sharpens his or her vocational skills in four key areas of ministry: preaching, pastoral caregiving, vision-casting, and administration.

The Pastor-Reader:
How a Program of Regular Reading Is Formational for Practicing Ministers

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Introduction: The Existential Crisis of the Pastor-Reader

Five years ago, alone in my office reading Fyodor Dostoevsky's novel *The Idiot*, I underwent an existential crisis of sorts. The feeling that came upon me that day—a kind of low-grade anxiety—came upon me quite suddenly, and the longer I sat reading, the more my uneasiness intensified. The feeling grew from a slight irritation to a dull stab until finally, by the time I closed the book two hours later, a full panic had set in. With a deep sense of guilt, I returned the book to my bookshelf and went about the rest of my day.

Five years later, I remember this encounter as among the most pivotal and portentous moments in my life. All that follows in this essay derives from this singular moment. Had I not experienced the anxiety I did that day—had I not experienced such pronounced feelings of guilt and uneasiness—I would never have given thought to all that follows.

But I did, and so I have.

I am of course not unique in having undergone an existential crisis because of Fyodor Dostoevsky; Dostoevsky is, after all, one of the most talented and trenchant novelists in human history. What makes my experience unique, however, is that it was not Dostoevsky's book that made me uneasy but the fact that I was reading his book *at all*.

You see, it was 2:00 P.M. when I sat down to read that day.

And I am a minister.

And I do not get paid to read; I get paid to *minister*.

Thus, while I was being deeply affected by Dostoevsky's prose, I nonetheless felt I was being negligent in my professional duties.

After all, there were members who needed visiting, a sermon that needed to be written, a budget that needed to be balanced, and countless committees that needed to be led.

Moreover, there was a building that needed maintenance, a capital campaign that needed guidance, a newsletter that needed to be written, and two dozen emails awaiting response.

So what was I doing reading a book?

And not just reading *any* book, but reading a work of fiction?

I was six months into my first senior pastorate at the time and, sitting with *The Idiot* in my hands, I suddenly found myself afraid that someone might walk into my office and catch me in the act.

Ergo my existential crisis.

I knew I could put the book up and read it later, but this was an even more daunting consideration than reading it now. "Later" I would be in afterhours meetings followed by family responsibilities followed by a (very) late dinner followed by—before I'd even had a chance to catch my breath—sleep.

A new day would then begin and the cycle would start anew.

And I wanted to read this book.

More than that, though—and my principal reason for this flood of anxiety—I knew that I *needed* to read this book, because I knew that reading this book was important for me. And not just important for me as a person who loves good literature, but important for me as a minister who wants to grow in my pastoral capabilities.

Though I did not yet have the evidence to back me up, I knew at a gut-level that reading books—books of *all* genres—would somehow sharpen my skills as a practicing minister. I somehow knew—though I had not yet set out to study my hypothesis in any formal fashion—that reading is not just an *in*formative act, but that reading is a deeply *form*ative act: an act that can shape a pastor-reader into a richer and more layered practitioner.

Meanwhile, I had been increasingly troubled by my growing awareness that, while ministers by-and-large profess a love for reading, very few seemed to actually be taking the time to *do* it. As a young minister trying to cultivate my own leadership identity, I had lately been asking seasoned ministers about their own reading habits, hopeful to find a mentor who could teach me how to integrate a love for reading into the daily practice of ministry—but I had been disheartened by their responses. *Who has the time to read*, most of these ministers had answered me, *when there is so much else to do?*

I of course understood their position. Being a minister is a demanding vocation, and finding margins of time can be notoriously difficult. However, I still contended that reading—no matter how busy a minister is; no matter whether the material she is reading has anything to do with her ministry or not—could be of great vocational value to a minister.

That is why I began reading *The Idiot* that day. Determined to enhance my own vocational skill—and convinced that *not* reading would somehow limit my pastoral range—I picked the book up in fear and trembling, trusting that what I was doing was important but terrified that I may nonetheless be shirking my *real* responsibilities.

I am deeply glad that I trusted my instinct and pressed on that day.

Five years later, I continue to read daily in my office, and while I *have* had church members inquire about what I am doing when I sit so quietly in my office with the door closed, I no longer feel anxious or guilty about it, because I have seen my commitment to daily reading bear consistent fruit in my ministry.

Over time, other ministers have come to learn of my daily practice and, intrigued, have asked me to explain how, in my opinion, commitment to reading has increased my capabilities as a pastor. Whenever I field this question, I sense that the ministers asking, just like myself that day with Dostoevsky, want to integrate reading into their daily routines but fear they cannot justify the time spent. It seems to me that all of these ministers are, in essence, asking this question of me because they are looking for permission to read, themselves.

We *want* to read, they seem to be saying, we just need to be able to explain why it is a valuable use of our time.

Convinced by my own experience that it *is* a valuable use of time and determined to demonstrate it, I entered Emory University's Doctor of Ministry program with the intention of studying the question of "reading for ministry." The argument I was pursuing was simple: that while often neglected (owing to obligatory "pastoral responsibilities"), general reading is invaluable for the on-going formation of clergy, informing a sense of personhood, contributing to a deeper sense of the complexities of relationships and their situational embeddedness, and broadening the understanding of what it is to be human, and that commitment to a program of general reading would necessarily enlarge a minister's capacities, broaden her social imaginary, and enrich her congregation in numerous ways.

Thus, the question I sought to answer was this: would commitment to a program of general reading benefit a group of ministers in clear and discernible ways? And if so, how would these ministers articulate the benefits they had experienced?

To that end, I assembled a group of ministers from across the country to commit to a yearlong immersion in daily reading, the objective being to determine at the year's end whether these ministers would self-report qualitative growth in their sense of personhood and in their various capacities as practicing ministers. Building off of neuroscientific insights concerning how the reading act wires and rewires one's neural circuitry—and how the neural circuitry of a "deep" reader corresponds with skills vital for the practicing minister—this project describes how a group of ministers, most of whom had not been committed to regular reading prior to their yearlong immersion in daily reading, *were* qualitatively formed as practitioners by their immersion in daily reading, and how members of their congregations report having observed demonstrable growth in these ministers' vocational capacities.

Project Overview

The study formally began in October of 2018 when I sent an electronic solicitation to over 100 ministers across the United States, inviting them to participate in a one-year reading project, which would run from January 1, 2019 through December 31, 2019. These ministers were asked to commit to a specific amount of time reading each day (it would be their choice as to how much). All participants were told that they would be asked to document the amount of time—and the various materials—they read each day, and that each would be encouraged to read as widely and as curiously as possible. I emphasized that I would not be telling them what to

read, or when to read, or how much to read, but that they would be responsible for determining these things for themselves. I would merely be there to hold them accountable. The final objective, I told them, was simply to assess their qualitative development (if any), not to aggregate quantitative data.

By the end of 2018, 17 ministers had committed to participate; one year later, at the project's end, only ten of those ministers had maintained their original commitment. Of those ten, four are Baptist, two are non-denominational, one is Methodist, one is Episcopalian, one is Presbyterian, and one is Nazarene. Eight are male and two are female. Their ages range from 32 to 65, all are Caucasian, and all but two are the senior (or solo) minister of their church. The shortest amount of time committed to by these ministers was 45 minutes; the longest was 2 hours.

The essay is broken up into three main sections, each section building upon the one before it. The first section deals with the formative nature of reading and the way a pastor's commitment to a program of general reading positively shapes her person. Here, recent findings from the field of neuroscience prove invaluable for demonstrating that "deep" reading does indeed enlarge a person's character and contribute to skills vital for a practicing minister.

The second section deals with the vocational value of reading, arguing that reading should not be conceived of as a luxury but as a vocational responsibility. Here, the details established in the first section surrounding the neurological effects that reading has on personhood are mapped on to four key areas of vocational ministry (preaching, pastoral caregiving, vision casting, and administrative leadership).

The third section then establishes the effectiveness of reading on ministerial practice (as argued in sections one and two) by presenting reflections from the ministers involved in the

yearlong reading project, as well as by presenting select testimonies from members of their congregations.

A final, concluding section then recapitulates the core argument of the project—that general reading sharpens the entire range of pastoral sensibilities, contributing to a deeper sense of the complexities of relationships and their situational embeddedness, and broadening the understanding of what it is to be human—and makes the case that ministers should therefore strongly consider incorporating regular reading into their slate of daily vocational responsibilities.

I. Reading for Formation

Section Overview

As mentioned in the introductory section above, I first came to pastoral-reading with a deep intuition that the act of reading is about more than being informed; that, along with being *in*formed by reading, the act of reading is likewise *formative* for a reader. What I did not realize, though, was that for those who don't intuit the formative power of reading, an assumption that reading is *only* informative can prevent a person from reading at all.

I became aware of this reality when one of the first pastors to respond to my invitation told me that, while he was interested in participating in the study, he was not sure how long he would stay the course. "I struggle with reading because I don't retain hardly any of what I read,"

he told me. “I therefore get frustrated and then I just don’t do it—because it’s almost, like, what’s the point?”

Intrigued by this response, I later asked the other participants of the project whether they, too, were ever frustrated by an inability to retain what they had read, and whether this was a conscious factor in reading less than they might otherwise read. Shockingly, close to half of the pastors responded that this was a limiting reason for them, too.

What I then realized was that this pastor, Chris Gilmore, had unwittingly put his finger on a key reason that many pastors read less than they otherwise might. Many pastors, I realized, were not limiting their reading because they could not justify the time spent; they were limiting their reading because they just didn’t see the point.

Gilmore’s words helped me realize that many pastors simply assume that the primary benefit of reading—that the *only* benefit of reading—is that it provides the reader with relevant information. In this way of thinking, a reader’s brain is essentially a computer that passively receives whatever information is uploaded to it. And in this way of thinking, if much of the uploaded data is not readily retrievable, it makes little sense to keep uploading information to the existing hard drive.[1]

Of course, it is not hard to empathize with Gilmore’s frustration. Studies show that the average person retains approximately 10% of what he or she reads.[2] And if the primary purpose

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[1] Alan Jacobs puts it this way: “If you think of reading as a means of uploading data, then reading will always seem too slow. If I can transfer the complete contents of a book to my computer in ten seconds, why does it take me a week to transfer it to my brain?” (*The Pleasures of Reading in an Age of Distraction*. [New York: Oxford University Press, 2011], 72.)

[2] Research on this varies. For a helpful overview, see Julie Beck. “Why We Forget Most of the Books We Read.” The Atlantic Monthly, January 26, 2018. https://www.theatlantic.com/science/archive/2018/01/what-was-this-article-about-again/551603/ (accessed January 10, 2020).

of reading is to upload easily retrievable information, there are no doubt better ways to access and store data.[3]

What Gilmore was unaware of, however, was that the wiring of the human brain is far more malleable than that of a simple computer, and that reading is an activity less about acquiring information as it is about forming the character of the person—and forming the neural pathways of the brain—doing the reading.

Neurological Formation

Maryann Wolf, in her her book *Reader, Come Home*, details the latest science behind the inner-workings of humanity's neural circuitry, demonstrating how one's reading habits literally wire and re-wire his or her neural pathways.[4] To that end, "deep-reading"[5] has been empirically demonstrated to create neural pathways that enlarge the brain's capacity for empathy, critical-thinking, and acceptance of ambiguity, while skim-reading, leisure reading, and distracted reading[6] have been demonstrated to create neural pathways that diminish empathy and that decrease capacity for mental skills like critical-thinking and acceptance of ambiguity.[7]

Wolf explains:

[3] For example, Google and The Cloud.
[4] Maryanne Wolf, *Reader, Come Home: The Reading Brain in a Digital World*. New York, NY: Harper, 2018.
[5] Wolf defines "deep reading" as reading that requires a heightened focus of attention, activating "multiple complex processes in dynamic tandem with the reading-brain circuit." (Ibid., 36-38).
[6] These approaches to reading "advantage immediacy, quick task switching, and continuous monitoring of distraction." (Ibid., 39).
[7] Wolf writes: "It takes years for deep-reading processes to be formed, and as a society we need to be sure that we are vigilant about their development. (Ibid., 38).

> "The best-known design principle, *neuroplasticity*, underlies just about everything interesting about reading—from forming a new circuit by connecting older parts, to recycling existing neurons, to adding new and elaborated branches to the circuit over time. Most important for this discussion, plasticity also underlies why the reading-brain circuit is inherently malleable (read: changeable) and influenced by key environmental factors: specifically, what it reads (both the particular writing system and content), how it reads (the particular medium, such as print or screen and its effects on the way we read), and how it is formed (methods of instruction). The crux of the matter is that the plasticity of our brain permits us to *form* both ever more sophisticated and expanded circuits and also ever less sophisticated circuits, depending on environmental factors" (my italics).[8]

Wolf goes on to point out that these neural pathways, once created, do not remain static; that instead, one must be hyper-vigilant in maintaining their form. "These [pathways]," Wolf writes, "do not come without work or practice, nor do they remain static if unused. From start to finish, the basic neurological principle—'use it or lose it'—is true…"[9]

Making this same point, Nicholas Carr writes, "The paradox of neuroplasticity… is that, for all the mental flexibility it gives us, it can end up locking us into 'rigid behaviors.' The chemically triggered synapses that link our neurons program us, in effect, to want to keep exercising the circuits they've formed."[10]

Wolf therefore caution readers: "Only if we continuously work to develop and use our complex analogical and inferential skills will the neural networks underlying them sustain our

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[8] Ibid., 18-19.
[9] Ibid., 19
[10] Nicholas G. Carr. *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains*. New York: Norton, 2010. 35.

capacity to be thoughtful, critical analysts of knowledge, rather than passive consumers of information."[11]

Reading for Formation Versus Information

Based on Wolf's research, I knew that pastors like Chris Gilmore were at risk of becoming passive consumers of information (ironically because they conceive of reading as being merely about the passive consumption of information). What I had experienced in my own ministry—and what I was eager to see in the ministries of Gilmore and others—was how (and if) their commitment to regular reading would expand their conception of what reading is for, and how (and if) reading would engender in them a well of wisdom that felt to them qualitatively different than a mere database of information. Would they sense that reading had somehow changed them, enlarging their notion of personhood and increasing their appreciation for the complexity of human nature and created reality? And would this change include a heightened capacity for critical-thinking and a willingness to more deeply engage nuance?

I was likewise eager to see whether these pastors would read beyond the boundaries of their own theological and ideological preferences. Citing Wolf's research and building his own study upon it, Alan Jacobs demonstrates that the cultivation of knowledge and wisdom—in contrast to the mere acquisition of information—requires a reader to begin from a stance of charity and curiosity rather than a stance of conviction and confirmation bias.[12] To read (only) to confirm one's viewpoint, Jacobs determines, stunts one's capacity to exercise wise counsel and

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[11] Wolf, 62.

[12] Alan Jacobs, *A Theology of Reading: The Hermeneutics of Love*. New York, New York; London: Routledge, 2018. See particularly 77-90.

appreciate the complexity of a situation.[13] This kind of tendentious reading, Jacobs says, is a kind of reading that "will be content to acquire a general or schematized overview of the work or the [author]," and "the particulars it does happen to pick up will remain fragmented and disconnected from one another." Jacobs concludes: "Such an indifferent or hostile [reading] always impoverishes and decomposes its object."[14]

Making this point even more starkly, Wolf writes, "[T]hose who have read widely and well will have many resources to apply to the world, while those who do not will have less to bring—which, in turn, gives them less basis for inference, deduction, and analogical thought and makes them ripe for falling prey to unadjudicated information, whether fake news or complete fabrications."[15]

Pastors, expected by their congregations to be fonts of wisdom rather than purveyors of information—interpreters of nuance rather than dispensers of ideology—need to be capable of engaging complicated and/or controversial issues and situations and handling them with delicacy and insight. What's more, a pastor needs to be formed in such a way that she deals always in particularities and never in generalizations.

To this end, the way one reads has an outsized influence on how capable a pastor is to perform his or her expected function(s). In fact, based on Wolf's, Carr's, and Jacobs' research, it is fair to say that *not* to read—or to read *only* to confirm and/or bolster one's already held assumptions—is quite literally to be stunted in his or her formation, as both of these approaches

[13] Jacobs writes, "The degree to which [reading helps you become a better person] depends not just on what you read—but also why and how." (*Pleasures*, 53).
[14] *Theology*, 53.
[15] Wolf, 56.

have been demonstrated to rewire one's existing neural network in such a way that capacity for empathy and critical-thinking is reduced.[16]

Formation of Knowledge, Wisdom, Understanding, and Love

If reading (merely) for information has been shown to stunt or limit a person's formation, deep-reading has been demonstrated to heighten one's capacity for knowledge, wisdom, and understanding. Studies show that the more widely and curiously one reads, and the more one engages complex texts, the more one grows in these three areas.[17] Wolf writes:

> "In the first quarter of our century we daily conflate information with knowledge, and knowledge with wisdom—with the resulting diminution of all three. Exemplified by the interactive dynamic that governs our deep-reading process, only the allocation of time to our inferential and critical analytical functions can transform the information we read into knowledge that can be consolidated in our memory. Only this internalized knowledge, in turn, will allow us to draw analogies and inferences from new information [i.e. execute wise judgment]… The perquisite of the reading life is *the ability to transform information into knowledge and knowledge into wisdom*" (my italics).[18]

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[16] Writes Wolf: "The first threat [to critical thinking] comes when any powerful framework for understanding our world (such as a political or religious view) becomes so impenetrable to change and so rigidly adhered to that it obfuscates any divergent type of thoughts, even when the latter is evidence-based or morally based." (Ibid., 63).

[17] See particularly Wolf, *Reader, Come Home*; Wolf, *Proust and the Squid: The Story and Science of the Reading Brain*. New York, NY: Harper, 2007.; and Keith Oatley, *Such Stuff as Dreams: The Psychology of Fiction*. Chichester, West Sussex, U.K.; Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011.

[18] Ibid., 192.

Meanwhile, as vital as knowledge, wisdom, and understanding are for a minister, research demonstrates that deep-reading is likewise imperative for increasing a person's capacity to *love*—which is no doubt a vital aspect of the pastoral identity. Citing the empirical work of cognitive scientists Keith Oatley and Raymond Mar, Wolf writes that "[t]he act of taking on the perspective and feelings of others is one of the most profound, insufficiently heralded contributions of the deep-reading processes." Wolf calls this capacity "a kind of learning to love."[19]

Similarly, Jacobs writes, "To be outside what you read and not be alienated from it, so that you take up the responsibility of loving that newfound neighbor as yourself—that is the philosopher's stone of reading."[20]

By immersing oneself in the life of another, a reader inhabits an entirely different set of circumstances and comes to better appreciate the lived experience of someone other than herself. "This is an intimately emotional dimension within the reading experience," Wolf writes, "this capacity to communicate and to feel with another without moving an inch out of our private worlds… We welcome the Other as a guest within ourselves, and sometimes we become the Other. For a moment in time we leave ourselves; and when we return, sometimes expanded and strengthened, we are challenged both intellectually and emotionally."[21]

[19] Ibid., 42-43.
[20] *Theology*, 119.
[21] Wolf, 43.

Forming the Capacity to Embrace the Other

Theologian Miroslav Volf, in his book *Exclusion and Embrace*,[22] grounds his theological project in this same movement: leaving oneself (one's tribal identity, one's given assumptions, and one's cultural comforts) in order to enter the unfamiliarity of another—all in service of returning to oneself changed and enriched by the encounter. Volf uses the image of Abraham as the paradigmatic model for what he deems a "necessary" movement for the person of faith. Writes Volf: "To be a child of Abraham and Sarah and to respond to the call of their God means to make an exodus, to start a voyage, to become a stranger."[23]

Through the prism of the Abraham story, Volf sketches in *Exclusion and Embrace* how "departure is part and parcel of Christian identity." Explains Volf:

> "Through faith one must 'depart' from one's culture because the ultimate allegiance [for a Christian] is given to God and to God's Messiah who transcend every culture. And yet precisely because of the ultimate allegiance to God of *all* cultures and to Christ who offers his body as a home for *all* people, Christian children of Abraham can 'depart' from their culture without having to leave it (in contrast to Abraham himself who had to leave his 'country' and 'kindred'). Departure is no longer a spatial category; it can take place within the cultural space one inhabits."[24]

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[22] Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion & Embrace: a Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*. Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1996.

[23] Volf, 39.

[24] Ibid., 39-40.

Reading, Maryann Wolf points out, facilitates such an act of departure. Through reading, one can depart without leaving the cultural space one inhabits. And this capacity to depart—this capacity to momentarily leave one's own lived experience to enter into the lived experience of another—has been demonstrated to be morally efficacious by cognitive neuroscience. Citing Oatley and Mar's research once more, Wolf writes: "When we read, the brain actively simulates the consciousness of another person, including those whom we would never otherwise even imagine knowing. It allows us to try on, for a few moments, what it truly means to be another person, with all the similar and sometimes vastly different emotions and struggles that govern others' lives."[25]

The capacity to identify with another's emotions and struggles is of clear value for the pastor. In fact, elaborating on this property of reading and reflecting on its implications for would-be leaders, Wolf adds: "The reading circuitry is elaborated by such simulations; *and so also the lives of those who would lead others*" (my italics).[26]

"What will happen to readers," Wolf goes on to ask, "who never meet and begin to understand the thoughts and feelings of someone totally different [than themselves]? What will happen to readers who begin to lose touch with that feeling of empathy for people outside their ken or kin?"[27]

According to Miroslav Volf's argument in *Exclusion and Embrace*, what will happen is a culture of individuals who, unlike Abraham, have never "left home." By not engaging in habitual deep-reading, pastors—who are called to be leaders; who are called to draw people together in a

[25] Wolf, 53.
[26] Ibid., 53.
[27] Ibid., 47.

sense of shared humanity rather than drive people apart through ignorance of the Other—are limiting their capacity to grow in agape love.

Formation Through Fiction

A 2013 Barna study reveals that pastors on average read more books than the general population, but that on average pastors read *fewer* works of fiction than the general population.[28] Intrigued by this study, I asked the ministers at the outset of the project whether the results of the Barna study resonate with their own reading habits. Almost to a person, the Barna results held true.

"I definitely read less fiction," pastor Emily Miller told me. "I have a tendency to think that non-fiction will be a better use of my time. When I *do* read fiction, it usually needs to be a social commentary or something that has historical and/or spiritual elements to it."

Miller's explanation is representative of other pastors in the study who likewise reported to me that they read little-to-no fiction each year. For these ministers, like with pastor Chris Gilmore above, the act of reading is seen principally to be an *in*formational act. "I feel like I'm not learning anything when I read fiction," pastor Curt Lowndes told me. "I *do* find fiction enjoyable—but I feel like there is so much I need to be learning, so much I don't know—so I feel guilty about reading fiction."

[28] See https://www.barna.com/research/reading-habits-of-todays-pastors/

These two objections—"we are not learning anything *important* through fiction" and "there are so many other things I need to be reading first"—capture the general sense of resistance most ministers feel toward fiction.

And while these arguments have a veneer of plausibility to them, they are factually incorrect, because research shows that, contrary to these ministers' assumptions, fiction is *deeply* formative for a reader. Not only does one learn "substantive things" through fiction; one also learns things about himself, others, and the world that he simply cannot learn through nonfiction.[29]

Keith Oatley, who has spent 20 years studying the psychology of fiction—mapping how different nerve centers of the human brain correspond to different seats of emotions and how these nerve centers are (or are not) activated by the act of reading fiction—summarizes his work by saying: "[My] research has been mainly on how reading fiction enlarges people's knowledge of 'self in the social world.' This research has found that certain brain groups are involved [when reading fiction]."[30]

Clarifying the significance of Oatley's work, Wolf writes, "The process of taking on another's consciousness in reading fiction, and the nature of fiction's content—where the great emotions and conflicts of life are regularly played out—not only contribute to our empathy, but represent what the social scientist Frank Hakemulder calls our 'moral laboratory.'"[31]

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[29] For a theologically compelling look at this fact, see the chapter "We Tell Ourselves Stories to Live" in James K. A. Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Works*. Cultural Liturgies. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2013. 103-150.

[30] Oatley, 29. Oatley's book is an indispensable resource for understanding the effect fiction has on the human brain and emotional development.

[31] Wolf, 53.

In *Reading for Preaching*, Cornelius Plantinga explores the connection between fiction's capacity to shape our "moral laboratories" and the vocational task of the minister. "The reading preacher will discover that great writers know the road to the human heart," Plantinga explains, going on to argue that by regularly immersing oneself in fiction, a pastor can grow in empathy and become better able to comprehend the circumstances of those he or she has been called to serve.[32]

Putting an even finer point on it, Eugene Peterson writes, "Pastors who neglect to read novels lack seriousness, or at least one aspect of it." Peterson expounds on this claim by saying, "World conditions, which insidiously eat away at the fundamentals of our reality, are so pervasive and hard to detect that it seems derelict not to make of such skilled and pleasant companions as present themselves between the covers of a novel."[33]

Formation Through Nonfiction

If a chief objection to fiction is that it yields impractical information—that the pastor-reader is not learning anything directly applicable to his or her work through reading fiction—so too is this an objection pastors feel toward reading nonfiction outside of the areas of theology, biblical studies, and church leadership. Emily Miller captures a popular sentiment among member of the study when she writes, "Unless what I am reading is explicitly related to ministry or theology, I feel guilty. Most of my congregation work hard jobs (manual labor, cleaning,

[32] Cornelius Plantinga. *Reading for Preaching: The Preacher in Conversation with Storytellers, Biographers, Poets, and Journalists*. Grand Rapids, Michigan; Cambridge, U.K.: William B Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2013. 6.

[33] Eugene Peterson. *Subversive Spirituality*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: WB Eerdmans, 1997. 185-192.

construction, etc.), so it feels weird to be spending significant time studying something that is vastly different from what our community is doing."

Miller's sensitivity, here, is to be commended, but she is wrong about the value reading nonfiction outside the areas of "practical ministry" could bring to her church community. To read widely and curiously—to read from as many genres and in as many disciplines as possible—is to begin constructing and filling that which Fred Craddock calls "the reservoir." The significance of the reservoir, Craddock holds, is that it is always there for the pastor to draw from when she needs it. The more widely one reads, the richer and more inexhaustible her reservoir becomes.[34] By reading memoirs from people of different cultures and times; by reading insightful analyses of current affairs; by studying sociological and philosophical texts; by reading bestselling titles of contemporary nonfiction—by committing one's time to reading texts of these varying sorts, one is preparing her person for future ministry. Just like with fiction, particular "brain groups" are engaged by reading in varying genres. The more—and more curiously—one reads, the more her neural makeup is sharpened, forming neural pathways that enable her to proffer wiser, more nuanced interpretations of the world and the particular people around her.[35]

Section One Summation

Research makes clear that reading is efficacious for far more than providing information to a reader. In fact, reading's capacity to *form* a reader is of far greater value than its capacity to

[34] Fred B. Craddock. *Craddock on the Craft of Preaching*. St. Louis, Mo.: Chalice Press, 2011. Craddock writes: "The surest way to stop growing is to stop reading. The surest way to rest, satisfied with your achievements, is to stop reading." (7).

[35] Oatley, 39-45.

*in*form a reader. Pastors like Chris Gilmore who are concerned that they do not retain the majority of what they read are right, for studies show that no one does. However, pastors like Gilmore are wrong in assuming that the principal benefit of reading is its capacity to inform. Instead, whether it is through reading fiction or nonfiction, a person is formed—is *shaped*—by the material he is reading, no matter whether he can recall what he has read or not. This shaping process extends beyond the capacity to be more well-informed and deals with the enlargement of one's notion of personhood. As one engages in deeper and more critical reading, the neural makeup of his brain is constantly being sharpened, heightening his capacity for critical thinking, expanding his awareness of his situational embeddedness, and increasing his sensitivity to the complexity of human nature and human relationships. Here, one's empathy, wisdom, and openness to "the other" are developed, and as practitioners of a vocation where these traits are paramount, reading—due to its formational power—is therefore an essential act for a practicing minister.

II. Reading as Formational for Vocational Practice(s)

Section Overview: Vocational Responsibility Versus Personal Luxury

For many pastors who read less than they otherwise might, the concern about information-retention is not as pressing as it is for pastors like Gilmore. Though they may not have studied the work of scholars like Wolf or Oatley, these pastors nonetheless intuit that reading is valuable for more than its capacity to inform. Instead, for these pastors, their reason for not reading is one of simple prudence: there is always a better—or more *valuable*—use of their time.

These pastors *want* to read; and these pastors recognize (in a vague way) how formative reading can be; however, they simply fear that their other obligations are more important.

Such is the nature of pastor Alex Lockridge's reluctance to read.

"I have a stack of books I *want* to read," Lockridge told me. "In fact, I have several stacks of books I *want* to read. But I never feel like I have the time. And even in the rare moments when I *do* feel like I have the time, there is always something that feels more important to do. Someone to visit or some other matter to take care of."

Lockridge then homes in on his chief reason for feeling this way: "I mean, I don't get paid to read, right?"

In such an honest confession, Lockridge lays bare the principle reason many pastors neglect their desire to read. While they suspect that reading could be formative—that is, while they intuit that reading is not only about gaining information (and while they assume it is certainly about more than simply escaping reality)—they nonetheless feel that reading is a luxury.

Ministers do not get paid to read, they think; ministers gets paid to minister.

This was, of course, how I felt that day five years ago with *The Idiot*, and I know from personal testimony that many others pastors feel this way, too.

The following section therefore addresses this widespread concern and argues that, yes, in a very real sense pastors *do* get paid to read—because of the formational power of reading. While a pastor is certainly not called to a congregation *only* to read, he is nonetheless failing his

congregation by not reading *at all*, for there are simply too many vocational benefits a pastor forfeits by failing to read.

Taking into account the formative nature of "deep" reading and considering its meritorious benefits as described by cognitive neuroscience, this section argues that commitment to a program of general reading is a vocational responsibility, one that sharpens a pastor's skill in four practical areas of ministry: preaching, pastoral caregiving, vision casting, and administration.

Formation for Preaching

Veteran minister Mike Queen, a recently retired Baptist minister nationally recognized for his preaching, tells a story about how he once read 31 books during a three-month sabbatical. According to Queen, six months after his return from sabbatical, a woman from his congregation approached him to apologize for her original opposition to his sabbatical.

"I was wrong," she told him. "When you came back and wrote in the church newsletter that you had read 31 books while on your travels, I thought 'that must be nice'. But since you have returned you seem different. Your preaching has a depth and breadth to it that I had not before experienced. I have to believe that taking the time to read as you did has made you a far better preacher."[36]

Queen's story is not unique. Many prominent pastors have gone on record to discuss how their commitment to regular reading has enriched their skills as preachers.[37] In fact, this very

[36] This story comes from an email Queen sent me on November 28, 2018.
[37] Tom Long, Tim Keller, Fleming Rutledge, Barbara Brown Taylor, and Eugene Peterson immediately come to mind.

claim lies at the heart of Cornelius Plantinga's book, *Reading for Preaching*. According to Plantinga, commitment to a program of general reading necessarily strengthens a pastor's preaching. "Next to knowledge of the Scripture and of topics in a seminary curriculum," Plantinga writes, "a preacher is extremely likely to benefit from a program of general reading, including of stories, biographies, poems, and much else."[38]

In *Reading for Preaching*, Plantinga demonstrates how regular reading tunes one's ear for language, strengthens one's diction, supplies one with images, and provides him with rich illustrations.

However, for Plantinga, the benefit of reading goes far deeper than imagery and illusions, diction and syntax. Of far greater consequence for a preacher, Plantinga holds that reading changes the preacher, him or herself. "The preacher who reads widely has a chance to become *wise*," he writes.[39]

Recalling Maryann Wolf's study of the connection between reading and wisdom, Plantinga here intuits for the preacher that which Wolf, Oatley, Mar, and others have demonstrated through cognitive neuroscience. By reading widely and regularly, a preacher's sermons have the potential to grow in depth, nuance, and wisdom, because *he himself* is necessarily growing in depth, nuance, and wisdom.

As a case in point, Eugene Peterson, reflecting on how he approaches the sermon writing task and considering how his sermons become richer in texture and deeper in substance, explains

[38] Plantinga, xi.
[39] Ibid., xi.

in *Subversive Spirituality*: "I get my best help [in preaching] from writers who did not set out to help me. My most valued allies are those who write novels and poems."

What preachers like Plantinga and Peterson are hip to is that which all preachers would do well to recognize. "What is not fed does not grow," Peterson writes, going on to explain how feeding one's mind by reading is, in fact, feeding one's whole person, as reading not only supplies the reader with knowledge but makes him wiser and more aware of the reality in which he is embedded.

Formation for Pastoral Care

According to Plantinga, "Ignorance of literature is a serious sin of omission." This might appear to be overstated, but Plantinga proceeds to explain his position by saying: "Identification with others may be partly instinctive, but it is also partly deliberate—and thus dependent upon an educated attempt to stretch our sympathies across circumstantial distance."[40]

Plantinga is here reminding us that we read in order to better understand the world and those in it. Because literature is such a potent resource for helping us *understand,* we therefore commit a grave transgression by failing to attend to it.

This is amply confirmed by Wolf's empirical research. Wolf explains:

"The consistent strengthening of the connections among our analogical, inferential, empathic, and background knowledge processes [through deep reading] generalizes well

[40] Plantinga, 7.

> beyond reading. When we learn to connect these processes over and over in our reading, it becomes easier to apply them to our own lives, teasing apart our motives and intentions, and understanding with even greater perspicacity and wisdom why others think and feel the way they do."[41]

This capacity to wisely interpret others and situations is, of course, a vital part of pastoral caregiving. When a pastor arrives for a pastoral visit—whether it is a routine visit in the home or a special visit in a locale like a hospital—she is expected to bring comfort, wisdom, and insight to the exchange. Knowing what her interlocutor is really thinking—being able to hear unspoken words beneath the words that are actually being spoken—is a necessary skill, and as Plantinga suggests and as Wolf demonstrates, reading is a key resource for developing this skill.[42]

Reflecting on this, Hulitt Gloer, Professor of Preaching at Baylor University, says: "In seminary I was taught how to exegete texts very well, but not how to exegete people. *Reading* taught me that."[43]

Gloer's words recall Charles V. Gerkin's concept of the "Living Human Document." "The self," Gerkin writes, "maintains its sense of being a self primarily by means of the interpretation of life as a story. Each of us has a story."

A central thesis of Gerkin's book is that, while people often know the *details* of their lives, they do not necessarily see the larger *story* those details are embedded in. By attending to

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[41] Wolf, 61.
[42] Wolf writes that through "the very special cognitive space within the reading-brain circuit," one can increase her "compassionate understanding of another's mind" (Ibid., 53).
[43] Glour told me this on a telephone call on February 15, 2019.

one's words and one's being—and meanwhile, by simultaneously making inferences and drawing connections—a pastoral counselor can help one interpret her life in such a way as to give it a *story*, thereby providing her lived experience a deeper sense of clarity and purpose.[44]

The ability to discharge such a sophisticated task, Glour contends, is made possible by reading—a point argued persuasively by Oatley and Mar in their psychological work surrounding the correlation between fiction and empathy.[45]

In a poignant example of this, Eugene Peterson recalls how reading James Joyce's *Ulysses* opened his eyes to the deeper significance of pastoral care. "Pastoral care," Peterson writes, "was more or less a routine function that I just did… So it was until I read Ulysses, [and] all those routines of pastoral care suddenly were no longer routines."

Peterson goes on to describe how, under Joyce's watchful eye, the seemingly mundane details of Leopold Bloom's life in *Ulysses* slowly accumulate into something deeply meaningful, and that Joyce's care for the preciousness of each detail in Bloom's day caused Peterson to "wake up to the infinity of meaning within the limitations of the ordinary person on an ordinary day."

"*This* is the pastor's work," Peterson concludes. "I wanted to be able to look at each person in my parish with the same imagination, insight, and comprehensiveness with which Joyce looked at Leopold Bloom."[46]

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[44] Charles V. Gerkin. *The Living Human Document: Re-Visioning Pastoral Counseling in a Hermeneutical Mode*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984.

[45] Oatley, 39.

[46] *Subversive*, 174-176.

The capacity to do this—the ability to attend to the particularity of the human being before us—is what pastoral caregiving is essentially about. To be able to see the fullness of the person in our care; to be able to recognize the wonder of her life; to be able to interpret experiences that to her seem inscrutable—this is the pastoral caregiver's task. To be up to it—to rightly exegete the living human documents they are—therefore requires a willingness on our part, like Peterson, to read widely and regularly.

Formation for Vision-Casting

In *Reading for the Common Good*, Christopher Smith writes, "Reading will inevitably expand and transform our individual imaginations, but it also plays a crucial role in changing our social imaginaries." Smith then goes on to say, "The practices of reading and conversation [about our reading] are vital for the process of transforming our social imagination."[47]

Here, Smith alludes to the work of philosopher Charles Taylor, who coined the neologism "social imaginary" in his book *A Secular Age*. A social imaginary, Taylor writes, is "the way ordinary people 'imagine' their social surroundings, and this is often not expressed in theoretical terms; it is carried in images, stories, legends, etc.'" In other words, our social imaginaries are our "background beliefs," the assumptions we hold that are so deeply ingrained that we take them for granted.[48]

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[47] Christopher C. Smith, *Reading for the Common Good: How Books Help Our Churches and Neighborhoods Flourish*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2016. 46.

[48] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007. 171-172. For a helpful distillation of Taylor's work, see also: James K.A. Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014.

According to Smith, reading does not only shape an individual's social imaginary, but also a community's. Through the reading act, a collective can expand its conception of what is wrong with the world and also of what that community might be able to do to address it. This is resonant with the claim of neuroscientist Steven Pinker, who writes in *The Better Angels of Our Nature* about how reading can produce communal transformation. "Reading," Pinker writes, "expands readers' circle of empathy by seducing them into thinking and feeling like people very different from themselves." Pinker goes on to argue that social novels like *Oliver Twist* and *Les Miserables*, along with nonfiction narratives like *Roots* and *Reading Lolita in Tehran,* have been vital in humanity's ongoing social evolution. Reading works like these, Pinker holds, has slowly helped humanity move collectively toward greater civil liberty and deeper measures of equality, because these books have "raised public awareness of the suffering of people who might otherwise have been ignored."[49]

According to Pinker, while other forms of media are likewise capable of "raising awareness," reading, more than other media, carries such a transformative effect because "reading is a technology for perspective-taking."[50]

Smith likewise contends: "Unlike broadcast media, reading permits us to control the pace at which we engage the content; unlike video, reading requires us to imagine the work in our heads. In other words, we cannot simply be passive consumers of what we read, even when we are reading primarily for our own amusement."[51]

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[49] Steven Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined*. New York: Viking, 2011. 175-177.

[50] Ibid., 175.

[51] *Reading*, 46.

A key responsibility for a pastor is inspiring his church's vision for mission. Without vision the people perish. To that end, a commitment to regular reading can help a pastor more deeply understand pressing social issues and equip him to cast a vision for how his church might get involved to make a difference.

Kentucky-based pastor Paul Sims recounts a story that well represents reading's capacity to do this very thing for a pastor and his church. In 2016, Sims and his church began a crisis relief ministry for homeless persons in their community. Reflecting on the growth the ministry has since undergone, Sims says, "Our ministry really began when members of our missions committee began reading the book *Evicted* together. We had already begun addressing the issue of homelessness in our area—which is to say, we had already started the ministry—but key leaders from our church remained uncommitted to what we were doing. After reading *Evicted*, though, and then later reading *Dopesick* and *When Helping Hurts*, our lay leadership began to develop a level of insight into the effects of poverty and a sense of empathy for the homeless that they had not had before. That's when engagement with our ministry *really* began."[52]

What Sims describes at his church—his story of how several members took on a different view toward poverty and its effects—is an example of a social imaginary being transformed, and as Sims points out, this broadening of his members' social imaginary took place on account of their shared reading.

"The way many of our folks saw it," Sims says, "the people we were ministering to had only themselves to blame. Either they had been wasteful or they lacked willpower. And no doubt

[52] This conversation is an imperfect transcript of a conversation I had with Sims on November 19, 2019.

many of the people we serve are guilty of those things—it's just that, until we began reading these books, our membership did not recognize the structural factors that daily affect people in these circumstances. Reading opened our eyes to the very real pressures people in poverty are living under—and, outside of reading, these are pressures most of us have no way of knowing about, ourselves."

Sims's account is evidence that reading helps a pastor and his community see beyond reality as it is and imagine the world as it could be. As Wolf writes, "The experience of the good reader is to be continuously engaged in trying to reach and express our best thoughts so as to expand an ever truer, more beautiful understanding of the universe and to lead lives based on this vision."[53]

The experience of the pastor, therefore, is synonymous with the experience of the good reader. Through commitment to regular, deep reading, pastors have their own social imaginaries broadened and equip themselves for the task of broadening their community's social imaginary, as well.

Formation for Administrative Leadership

In his memoir *The Pastor*, Eugene Peterson recalls a conversation with a colleague early in his ministerial career. The two ministers discussed literature that day and both were enlivened by the exchange. As the conversation drew to a close, his colleague said, "I wish I could do this every day."

[53] Wolf, 203.

"Why don't you?" Peterson asked.

"Because I have to run this damn church," his friend answered.[54]

This story has always stuck with me. Not only because I know it to be resonant with the unspoken sentiment of many pastors, but because it illustrates the way ministers assume that our love for literature has nothing to do with our administrative leadership.

Yes, we'd like to read more than we do—but we have to run these damn churches!

What we fail to apprehend, though, is that a deeper commitment to reading actually bolsters our capacity for administrative leadership, not hamper it.

"I know very few leaders who are not interested in reading," writes Michael Hyatt, a leading business coach and the former CEO of Thomas Nelson books. "Readers," he explains, "possess a comparative advantage [in business administration]."

Among the reasons Hyatt cites for how reading makes one a better organizational leader is reading's capacity to improve one's people skills. "Reading has the potential to help us boost our emotional IQ and better identify with people. This is a vital skill for creating alignment, understanding motivation, and setting organizational goals."[55] In noting this, Hyatt is once more naming that which Wolf, Oatley, and Mar have pointed out through data culled from cognitive neuroscience: the more one reads, the more his neural makeup (being reshaped by the reading process) correlates with high levels of emotional intelligence.

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[54] Eugene H. Peterson, *The Pastor: A Memoir*. New York: HarperOne, 2011. 143-145.

[55] Michael Hyatt, "5 Ways Reading Makes You a Better Leader." michaelhyatt.com, January 20, 2020. https://michaelhyatt.com/science-readers-leaders/ (accessed January 21, 2020).

Numerous high-profile CEOs—notably Warren Buffet, Bill Gates, and Elon Musk—have discovered this for themselves. Each of these leaders recommends to would-be administrators that they read widely and regularly. In fact, Buffet himself reads six hours *daily*, the wider the content range, the better. "I read and I think," Buffet writes. "And because I do, I make fewer impulsive decisions [as a leader] than others."[56]

For the pastoral leader, this trait is imperative. In a given week, a pastor finds himself dealing with a wide-range of issues to manage and address. If he is given to excitability, he will likely make impetuous decisions and act on impulse. Reading can help center him and prepare him to execute wise judgment.

Similarly, as Hyatt points out above, reading can help a pastor bond his staff and his congregation in a sense of shared purpose. The empathic and visionary skills made possible by regular reading can help him cast the vision for where the organization is headed and more effectively communicate the plan for how to get there.

As Hyatt ultimately concludes: "If you want to lead, you simply must read. It's one of the surest ways to develop the qualities that will make you stand out and simultaneously equip you to lead as your influence grows."[57]

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[56] Kathleen Elkins, "Berkshire Hathaway Star Followed Warren Buffet's Advice: Read 500 Pages a Day." *CNBC*, March 27, 2018. https://www.cnbc.com/2018/03/27/warren-buffetts-key-tip-for-success-read-500-pages-a-day.html (accessed January 23, 2020).

[57] Hyatt, "5 Ways."

Section Two Summation

For every pastor who neglects to read because he feels it is a waste of time (i.e. "I don't remember what I've just read"), there are countless others who neglect to read because they simply can't justify the time. These pastors tend to conceive of reading as a luxury, not as a vocational responsibility. Due to the formative nature of reading, however, reading *is* a vocational responsibility. Because a pastor gets paid to preach, provide pastoral care, inspire a church's vision, and handle its administration, and because reading has been demonstrated to increase a practitioner's abilities in each of these areas, pastors in a very real way *do* get paid to read. The refashioning of a pastor's self through regular reading—the on-going formation of her personhood and the sharpening of her ability to appreciate complexity and parse nuance—necessarily strengthens her in these vocational spheres. Consequently, pastors who want to preach well, care well, inspire well, and manage well, *do* well to think of reading as a responsibility, not a luxury.

Bridge

Thus far, this essay has made the case that (1) reading is more a formative act than an informative act, and that (2) because the formation made possible by reading increases a minister's skills in areas central to her ministry, ministers should therefore begin conceiving of reading as a vocational responsibility rather than a personal luxury. The central claim of this essay is that general reading is often neglected by practicing ministers but that this is problematic, because reading is invaluable for a minister's on-going formation, owing to reading's capacity to sharpen her ministerial skills, enlarge her sense of personhood, and enrich

her congregation in numerous ways. Now, having surveyed information and theory surrounding the formational properties of reading and having demonstrated four areas of ministry for which reading can sharpen a minister's skills, this final section features feedback from ministers in my study revealing how their yearlong immersion in daily reading *did* in fact prove beneficial to them (and specifically in these four vocational areas). The question this project sought to answer was whether ministers committed to regular reading would indeed—after a yearlong commitment to reading—self-report that their reading had made them more confident and more proficient in their daily work, and moreover, whether they would be able to describe in practical ways *how*. In other words: would these ministers feel that their person had been somehow enlarged, that they'd become wiser and more layered, and that reading had in fact proved valuable enough (toward their proficiency as ministers) that they would begin to see it as a daily vocational responsibility.

The following reflections from these ministers—followed by select testimonies from members of their congregations—provide qualitative, anecdotal evidence that reading *was* valuable for their on-going formation and that they did come to see reading as central to their vocational identities. These reflections bolster the claim that general reading is an activity toward which *all* clergy should therefore be more committed.

III. Reflections and Testimonies from Ministers and Congregants

Minister Reflections

From January 1, 2019 through December 31, 2019, the ten ministers cited at the outset of this essay read between 45 minutes to 2 hours per day. For most of these ministers, this was the

first time since seminary that they had read with this kind of intentionality. In fact, based on a question answered by all of the ministers at the outset of the project, only two of them had already been committed to reading in an intentional way—and for both of these, their time commitments for this project doubled what they had been averaging prior to beginning the year.

Each of the ministers in the study maintained their level of commitment throughout the year, and come January 2020 I sent each of them three sets of open-ended questions, each question inviting the ministers to reflect upon the practical impact of their year spent reading. The final question they considered was the most comprehensive in scope, aimed at soliciting feedback that would answer the central claim of the project: "Do you feel you are in some way different as a pastor because of this year's commitment to reading?"

To a person, all ten ministers answered that, yes, they all felt that their person—and thus the presence they daily brought to the ministerial task—had been changed by the experience.

Kelsey Grissom, pastor of Camp Branch United Methodist Church in Alabaster, Alabama, responds: "Because of our reading, I think I am a more thoughtful and well-rounded pastor." Grissom adds, "This year spent reading has contributed to my understanding of human nature and human failings. It has allowed me to share in many experiences I may not (and some I hope I will not) personally experience. It has afforded me, in many cases, a more open and explicit view of someone's heart as they go through life."

Emily Miller, cited earlier, likewise responds, "Until this year I had not created the habits and structure necessary to give myself time to read. Because of this year's reading, though, I feel like I am now relying less on my own wisdom as a pastor and instead giving more time to the

wisdom of others. I have found that reading inspires me and energizes me in a way that few other things do."

Mark Miller, pastor of First Baptist Church of Clarkton, NC, writes that he has become wiser on account of his year spent reading. "To read about people in different countries, times, and situations has helped expand my mind and my horizons. Reading has helped me see a little better, which has helped me grow in wisdom."

Michael Usey, pastor of College Park Baptist Church in Greensboro, NC, reflects: "Reading has made me a fresher presence to my people. Because of my reading this year, I was off social media more, and I feel more centered because of it. It has helped with the humble practice of listening to other's thoughts and words, which is often our task as pastors and ministers."

In different ways, the other six ministers also described how their year of reading has positively shaped them as pastoral practitioners. They spoke of an increased sense of wisdom and an enlarged capacity for empathy; they spoke of a heightened sense of gratitude and an increased patience for people with differing viewpoints. They spoke of a greater willingness to read challenging texts and a more developed appreciation for items of ambiguity. In sum, they—in differing ways—described how their personhood had been enlarged through their encounters with reading. They had not only been informed by the texts they had read; they had been *formed* by them.

Some, like Mark Miller, reflected on how certain texts had opened their eyes to the lived experience of others. Miller writes, "This year's reading helped me become more sensitive to, and understanding of, people in different lifestyles and life situations than me." Miller went on to

cite how, in particular, the novel *Less* gave him deeper insight into the LBTQA lifestyle; how the aforementioned *Evicted* gave him deeper insight into issues concerning affordable housing; and how *Angels to the Rescue* gave him deeper insight into the experience of first responders. Here, Miller describes the kind of personal expansion Wolf details in *Reader, Come Home*, demonstrating from his own experience how a reader's engagement of the lived experience of others through literature enriches his conception of the world and helps him better understand the complexity of human nature and relationships.

Others, like Neil Dunnavant, Executive Pastor of First Presbyterian Church of Greensboro, NC, talked about how their reading had aided them in more practical ways, as it inspired ideas for sermons, Sunday School classes, newsletters, and weekly devotionals.

When asked to reflect on whether their reading had benefited them in areas such as preaching, pastoral caregiving, mission engagement, and administration, the ministers' responses varied in content but were similar in answer: all ten reported a benefit in each of the first three areas but cited no examples of growth in the area of administrative leadership.

Mark Miller writes that his preaching was no doubt enhanced by his reading, claiming, "I've used a lot of anecdotes and analogies from my reading in my sermons this year… and seeing how the best writers pace and build anticipation has helped me with my sermon writing. I feel much more prepared and capable because of it."

Similarly, Marshall Jolly, rector of Grace Episcopal Church in Morganton, NC, writes that his reading has helped him build a file of "quotations, thoughts, and paragraphs that have helped my preaching." Jolly adds that he intends to continue adding to this file, believing that the larger the file gets, the sharper and more enriched his sermons have the potential to be. Without a

continued commitment to reading, he reflects, his sermons will lack the depth they have acquired through his reading.

Meanwhile, Kelsey Grissom writes that "fiction, and particularly the classics and children's literature," have "helped me to have more compassion for people in broken situations and to better understand people in situations I have not experienced." Grissom explains how her notion of personhood has expanded through these encounters with foreign cultures and foreign ideas, and goes on to explain how, counter-intuitively, this broadening of her global awareness has helped her in her small, rural church in Alabama, as it has aided her appreciation for the mystery and complexity of all human beings.

Emily Miller, whose church is multicultural and includes a large number of ethnic minorities and immigrants, writes, "Reading history and biographies (especially related to racial trauma) has helped me consider some of the generational trauma those in our congregation and community have experienced." She explains that, "We have some in our youth ministry who were separated from or left by family who migrated here and have to work through the trauma associated with that." Reading, she concludes, has helped her capacity to "listen to and give space for people to process these stories."

Miller meanwhile offers profound words concerning the way her reading has strengthened her capacity to inspire mission-engagement at her church. "Reading *Stamped from the Beginning* was particularly helpful in opening our eyes to how intentional and vigilant we must be about combating prejudice and injustice," she writes. "Reading this book has helped us as a church process our mission and think about how we will interact with our community."

For her part, Grissom responds that mission-engagement "is where memoirs came in most handy." She writes, "Memoirs helped me read about what inspired or spurred others to recognize the directions they wanted their lives to take, and to make major changes." By increasing her understanding of these things, Grissom claims she has been able to help cast a new vision for her church as she leads the congregation to broaden its social imaginary.

Due to spatial limitations and the anecdotal nature of the ministers' numerous responses, I will leave off documenting the entirety of their feedback. By January 21, 2020, I had received well over 5,000 words of comprehensive feedback from these ten ministers, all of them reporting a deep appreciation for their year spent reading and the effect it has had on them as persons and as leaders. When asked, nine out of ten of them claimed that they would maintain their same level of commitment to reading in the coming year, and the one who answered she would not intends merely to reduce her commitment from two hours to 90 minutes.

Ultimately, therefore, these ministers' responses reflect a marked growth in their awareness of the formative nature of reading and reveal a deeper appreciation for (a) fiction and (b) nonfiction outside the areas of their own theological, political, and ideological preferences. What these ministers self-report should be taken as firsthand evidence that reading *is* a valuable use of time for a minister, that reading *does* enlarge a minister's person and her awareness of human complexity, and that reading *does* bear practical fruit in a minister's daily vocational practice.

Congregant Testimonies

Beyond the self-reports from the ministers involved in the project—which were ultimately what the project sought to capture, as the formational element of reading is necessarily subjective and qualitative, captured in anecdotal expression rather than quantitative datasets—two of the ministers involved in the project *also* shared testimonies from members of their congregations, which only further bolsters the claim that general reading is of practical vocational value to the practicing minister.

According to one of the pastors (who wishes to remain anonymous due to the nature of the following conversations), his members have seen obvious growth in the ways he addresses current events and controversial topics. He tells me that three different church members have approached him this year with comments about how, both from the pulpit and on social media, his way of speaking "pastorally" about difficult topics has become "more even-handed" and more "grace-filled." As the pastor of a "purple" church, these members told him that they appreciated the way he seemed to be able to better articulate a clear position while simultaneously acknowledging the complexity of the situation at hand. "You just talk about these things differently," one of these members told him. And while they did not know about his commitment to the reading project, he tells me that he has no doubt that his reading—and the way he has stretched himself to read voices he does not agree with—has been the thing that has enabled him to speak more knowingly and charitably as a pastor.

Meanwhile, Michael Usey writes of how the 2016 election caused a rift between him and a member of his church, and of how this member credits Usey's reading with helping heal the rift. According to Usey, certain things he had said and written during the run-up to the election had alienated this longtime member, and it was not until Usey recommended to this man that the

two of them read the book *High Crimes and Misdemeanors* together that the rift began to heal. Writes Usey: "The book is about the history of impeachment, and it helped heal the rift between us." Usey explains that, after reading the book and meeting several times to discuss it, this member thanked him for recommending the book. Reading together, Usey claims, helped the two confront their problem in a constructive and reconciling way. Usey goes on to say that he has had this experience with other members, too: that they have later approached him to express their thanks for how reading with their pastor has benefited them. Meanwhile, for his part, Usey claims that reading with his members helps him better manage congregational relationships and thus become a more effective pastor.

IV. Conclusion

Five years after facing my fears and committing to a program of regular reading, I remain equally concerned about the neglect members of the ministerial guild continue to show to reading. Even when I tell ministers that I, myself, once underwent an existential crisis over whether it was permissible to spend time in the office reading, and then go on to tell them about how my commitment to reading has formed me in ways impossible had I not taken the time to read, still, these ministers respond—if not in word, in essence—that reading is a luxury, not a vocational responsibility. These ministers claim that there are more pressing items to attend to, and that, after all, they do not get paid to read.

Meanwhile, of the few ministers I speak with who *do* take the time to read, the sense of guilt they feel for reading books—particularly works of fiction—is always apparent. For these

ministers, they are doing something illicit by reading; therefore, the amount of time they commit to reading is necessarily lesser than they otherwise would.

As this project hopes to make clear—both through practical theory and anecdotal evidence—these are problems both spiritual and physical, theological and neurological. A failure to read hampers pastoral leadership and stunts vision. It limits wisdom and diminishes knowledge.

My hope therefore is that reading of the experience of the ministers who participated in this yearlong reading project—and hearing testimony from some of their congregants—will help other ministers recognize the vocational value of reading and grant them permission to do it more freely.

Rector Marshall Jolly, reflecting on the value he has found in reading and the enlargement of his person that reading has occasioned, concludes his summative statement by saying: “I wish more ministers did this!”

And that is how I conclude this project, myself: by reiterating how much I wish more ministers did this. Reading, more than any other self-driven activity, can facilitate for ministers the process Fyodor Dostoevsky calls in *The Idiot*, “the everlasting and perpetual process of discovering.”

Five years later, I am glad that I kept reading long enough to find out.

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