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# The Power of Reflecting with Peers

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Joshua comes into the office expressing his doubts. He felt confident that God was calling him to ministry, but he just didn't feel his gifts measured up to those of others in his class. He could list the accomplishments of other students, but he saw only his own shortcomings. It was clear that he didn't see in himself what I and others saw in him.

This is an all too common occurrence. We can trace this human predicament all the way back to Moses. Remember that conversation between Moses and God: "But God, I've never been very good at this public speaking bit, and now you want me to speak for you?" God responds by telling Moses that he will tell him what to say (Exod. 4:10-12).

Have you been in Joshua's or Moses' shoes? When that strong internal critic rents too much space in your brain, trusting your gift-ness is difficult. This is when you need to hear God speaking to you through the community. Peer groups are an excellent venue in which to cultivate an atmosphere where you can be affirmed and encouraged to become everything God has created you to be. Your tendencies to see only the places where you don't measure up to your own expectations will be kept in check by your peers, who

will be able to hold up a mirror and reflect back to you the unique gifts God has given you. They can nurture your true self, and with that authenticity integrated into your practice of ministry, your vocational formation will flourish.

It is easy to fall prey to comparisons. Consider the story of Moses, the leader. It is easy to imagine someone wishing to emulate Moses. But Moses worried about not being an eloquent speaker and questioned God's wisdom in calling him. God dismissed his excuses and instead promised that he would not be alone. God would provide Aaron, his brother, to help him. Most important, God pledges to be with him. This is also true for you. You need not try to be like one of your classmates or an ideal in your imagination or even a Moses. God has called you as you are and will further develop your gifts through seminary and beyond. Cultivating the practice of reflecting with peers is a powerful antidote to attempts to be anyone other than who you are by nature and by grace.

You are created to live in community. God gives you partners in ministry. In the practice of ministry, you are connected to God's life source through peer groups. Some of these groups develop naturally and organically. Thanks be to God when that happens! Other times you will need to create peer groups to support you in your vocational formation process.

The power of peer reflection is a resource for student and supervisor-mentor alike. This is a lifelong power source for ministry. Good practices during the seminary years will develop into habits that will serve you throughout your professional life. Through the various reflection groups of which you are a part, you will discover what is needed in a group to make it a safe place to share your vulnerabilities and your strengths. You will find the methods that best enable you to uncover your gifts and develop your ministry skills.

In this chapter, I invite you not only to look at the various opportunities for peer reflection within the educational structure and to be intentional in utilizing these groups but also to create your own peer groups.

### For Students: Making the Most of Required Peer-Reflection Groups

It is important to be intentional about reflecting with peers. The curriculum in most theological schools offers a variety of formal reflection groups. Approaching these requirements as merely hoops to jump through or items to check off the list is dangerous. I encourage you to use each of these opportunities to learn more about group process and to become a competent group member. This will enable you to gain even more than the stated outcomes of these classes. Each of these groups will provide its own guidelines or covenants for group formation. Finding effective formats for group interactions is valuable. Ask yourself what dynamics are needed to make this an environment for your personal and vocational growth. Make mental notes about what is important to you in order to build trust and acceptance, and foster good communication.

Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) is a great opportunity to explore a variety of types of interactions. The Association for Clinical Pastoral Education standards for Interpersonal Relations Groups have been developed over the years and will provide a model for how a diverse group can affirm and further the development of each individual in the group through an agreed-upon process and focus. This educational model will give you tools for structuring reflection, such as bringing prepared critical incidents reports and verbatims to the group and soliciting specific feedback for your growth areas.

When membership in the group is assigned rather than self-selected, interactions can be challenging, especially if some members are coming from a different theological or political perspective than you. This is the time to check in with yourself and examine your primary reaction mode. Do you withdraw or shut down? Do you spend all your energy thinking about your rebuttal rather than deeply listening to the other point of view? Do you attempt to find allies who are ready to join you in battle?

You will receive the greatest benefit if you work to find ways to engage in healthy dialogue with individuals who have different opinions. A diverse group will give you an effective lab in which to gain understanding of another person's position as well as your own. Later when you encounter similar polarizing positions in your congregation or ministry sites, you will have a new lens for understanding.

In these formal prearranged groups, you will encounter a wide range of interpersonal skills among group members. It can be frustrating if any of the group members lack commitment to the group's covenant. If this happens, again, do your own personal check-in. What is your response? What group leadership skills might you implement to reengage the members? In what ways can you build healthy coalitions within the group to improve the effectiveness of the discussions?