

Learning in pieces

Theological education may be fracturing, but there's wisdom and beauty in the fragments.

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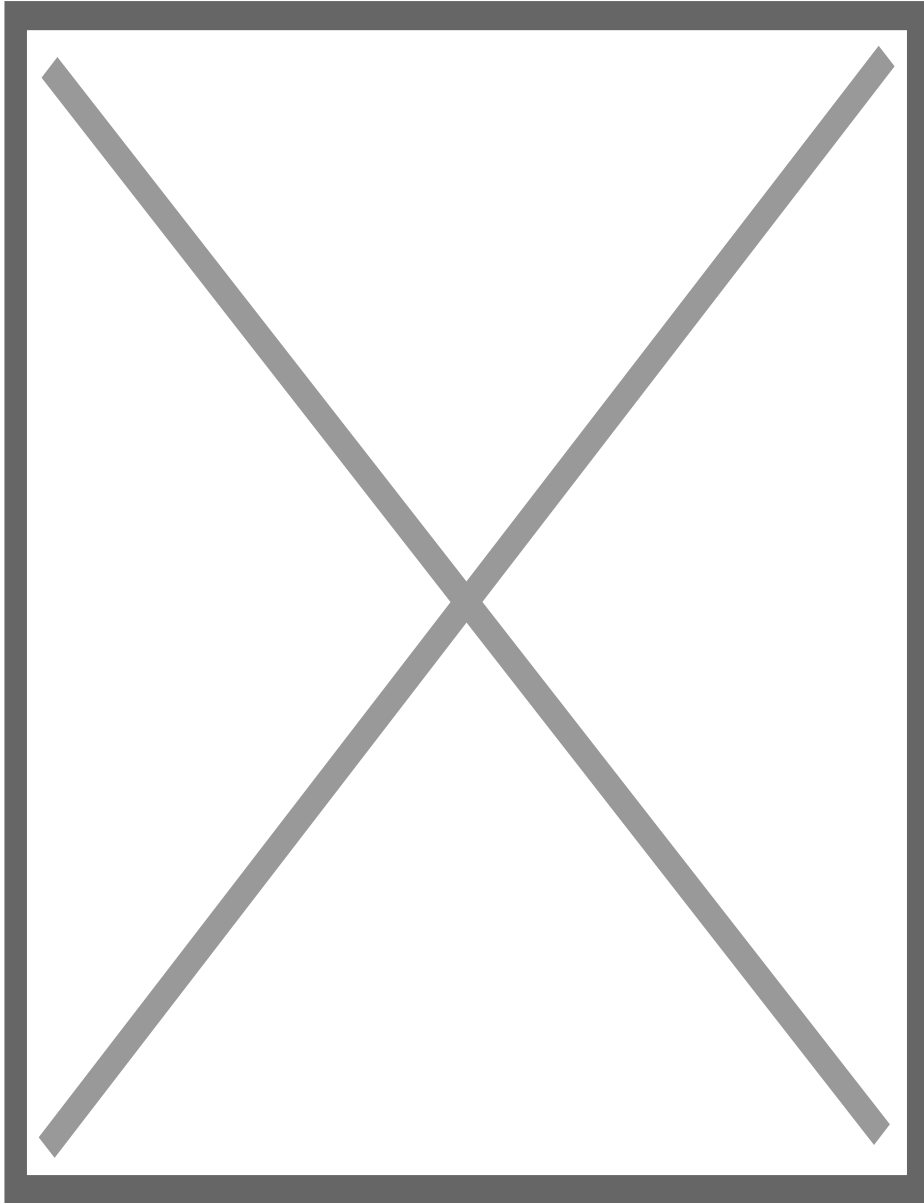


Illustration by Agniya Papadatos

In recent years, we've published numerous articles about the dissonance between our inherited models of theological education and the realities of today's world. Western theological institutions are increasingly fracturing due to social, economic, and technological pressures. What if, rather than attempting to rebuild

theological education from the rubble, we spent some time dwelling in the beauty of the fragments that remain? There are plenty of exciting things happening in theological education—fresh ideas, nimble models, new pedagogies. These might not be programmatic blueprints or clues to a secret knowledge of what theological education can and should be. But if we allow each facet to shine on its own, we may begin to see a mosaic that bears witness to wisdom, resilience, and hope.

With this in mind, we asked eight theological educators to tell us what is most exciting about their current work. They are all senior fellows with the Theological Education Between the Times project and contributors to the new book [At This Time](#).

Integrated wisdom

I have been learning how to teach wisdom literature for more than a decade. In my first attempt, at the Baptist Seminary in Bolivia, I tried to help students discern the structure or flow of each book and appreciate the unique relationship the genre has with the rest of the Old Testament. This kind of study makes clear that great biblical themes such as covenant, exodus, cult, and prophecy are largely absent from wisdom literature. One might conclude that wisdom, in the Old Testament, is a kind of reflection that unapologetically lets life, rather than God, set the agenda.

But Latin American theology helps us see that wisdom literature can be contextual—fully embedded in the life of this world—and still be divine. Indeed, if it is the wisdom of the Word who became flesh and dwelt among us, it could not be otherwise.

To be embedded in the world does not mean that wisdom provides an algorithm for making discrete decisions. Instead, wisdom seeks to integrate all areas of life—friendship, romantic love, family life, wealth, poverty, theology, ethics, confusion, suffering, wonder—and this integration is an essential part of pursuing it.

So, two questions emerge: How can we teach wisdom’s integrative character? And what insights does teaching about wisdom have for theological education in general?

“The beginning of wisdom is this,” says Proverbs 4:7: “Get wisdom.” This might sound tautological. But that is only because in our day we are quick to assume a dichotomy between theory and practice—an assumption that ancient wisdom literature doesn’t share. Attending to wisdom’s integrative character means seeing it as more than a mere subject; it is about a calling and a response. And wisdom’s integrative character can also inform our overall understanding of theological education. In the pursuit of wisdom, the instructor is not one who has mastered the integration of all aspects of life and simply transfers this knowledge to the student. Instead, teaching about wisdom requires journeying together as we learn how to live in our particular context.

Learning to live requires more than a series of disconnected courses in different disciplines. Wisdom’s way of being can’t be abstracted from everyday life. It requires a community of learners journeying together in solidarity—studying scripture, seeking justice, offering mercy, suffering hardship, loving one another, proclaiming good news. Only in the fullness of life together can wisdom emerge.

The idea of transcending the dichotomy between theory and practice helps me see the book of Proverbs with fresh eyes. Recently I’ve been approaching its aphorisms as something like the steps of a meal: choosing the ingredients, cooking, setting the table, giving thanks, eating together, and cleaning up. Hospitality is a significant

theme in Proverbs. “Come, eat of my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed,” says Lady Wisdom (9:5). Like cooking and eating, the pursuit of wisdom requires negotiating aspects of life such as identity, convenience, and responsibility—which is to say that growing in wisdom happens within specific contexts, with their specific opportunities and challenges.

—David Nacho, director of street ministries at First Baptist Church of Vancouver, British Columbia

Wisdom in a time of war

We live in a time of global war. The late Pope Francis invited us to theologize from that concrete situation. In his 2023 apostolic letter *Ad theologiam promovendam*, Francis wrote that the times demand “openness to the world” and a theology that is fundamentally contextual, dialogic, transdisciplinary, and sapiential. How can theological formation attune our senses to Sophia Wisdom, who is present even amid political violence, militarization, and ecocide?

Our schools and faith communities offer spaces where we can speak truthfully about what is happening. From my context as a Catholic sister committed to gospel nonviolence, I find those spaces on the peripheries of the institutional church among the peacemakers of Pax Christi USA, a group that has been advocating for disarmament, racial justice, and Palestinian liberation for more than 50 years. The temptation in our current moment is to react with urgency to every executive order the White House issues. But the sheer volume and absurdity of it all is designed to overwhelm our opposition—and to distract us from the deep soulwork of collective conversion and social reparation.

To engage this work, I’m part of an experiment in spiritual formation with fellow Pax Christi members. We’ve convened a working group that is adopting a dialogic, transdisciplinary approach to nonviolence education and praxis. Guided by the work of the Gesturing Towards Decolonial Futures collective, our process is rooted in storytelling, theological reflection, and self-examination.

We begin by recognizing that the world modernity has made is inherently violent and unsustainable. The modern conveniences we enjoy cause harm to God’s creation and to the poor. When did this invisible violence become apparent to each of us? Group members recall kairos moments when they became conscientized; we share stories of ancestors who resisted.

We hold in common a desire to unlearn our modern colonial habits of consuming and accumulating without limit, yet we still find ourselves reverting to transactional ways of relating or clinging to technocratic narratives of progress. Acknowledging the inner voice that resists change, we ask what loss needs to be grieved. We name the harm caused by the Catholic Church, which sanctioned and participated in the murder and enslavement of Black and Indigenous peoples, settler-colonial thefts of land and labor, and the privatization of public goods. Sometimes the group sits in silence, present to the anguish and shame and longing for transformation.

It is painful to look for long at the deep religious and ecclesial roots of our current crisis. But looking together at the thing that is killing us—the catastrophe we have collectively wrought—may be a way to survive through crisis and midwife a future. Pope Francis urged the church to embrace the synodal way of journeying together through history with respect for the gifts each culture brings. This entails listening to people like the Indigenous leaders at COP30 in Belém, Brazil, who have survived centuries of colonial and genocidal oppression while continuing to protect the forest. They have wisdom to teach those with ears to hear.

So many of us yearn to preserve life. To do so requires letting go of the world as we know it—and clinging to the Living One who goes before us.

—Ann Killian, *OP*, assistant professor of English at the University of Notre Dame

Counterpolarizing the classroom

Learning to read the Bible is not just a technical skill. It is a work of wisdom.

When I teach New Testament classes, my goal is to form and equip wise students of scripture. Wisdom demands readers who are not afraid of complexity or lured by easy answers. It forms leaders who read in ways that are responsive to the needs of faith communities. It fosters rigorous and humble engagement with the Bible in diverse and thick communion with others. It instills in students a deeper love for God, themselves, and others. My role as a teacher is to direct my students' desires toward wisdom.

But what does this look like practically, especially in this cultural moment of extreme polarization? How do theological schools do this?

One way is by counterpolarizing our classrooms, intervening against the kind of othering that fractures shared spaces and pits communities against each other based on caricatures of their beliefs and values.

Counterpolarizing begins with stoking curiosity in students about their peers, the biblical authors, and the scholars they engage: who they are, where they come from, what they and their communities care about. It is a pedagogy that encourages reflection over reaction and generative questions over doctrinaire statements. It involves learning to understand and represent another's point of view fairly and to highlight points of connection along with disagreement.

This can be practiced through reading response questions, to take one example. Along with questions that address reading comprehension and critical engagement, I assign others that address connection: How does the reading relate to other material in the class? To your life and ministry context? How does it reinforce or challenge your existing assumptions?

The biblical studies classroom is well suited to be a space of encounter. We gather around a shared purpose: to interpret the Bible. Students tend to be more familiar with interpretations of the Bible than with the biblical texts themselves, and they need practice paying careful attention to the text and asking questions of it before coming to conclusions about it. I have my students make textual observations in which they notice and describe the text's features but refrain from saying what it means. This teaches them to withhold judgment while gathering facts and formulating questions for further investigation.

In the biblical studies classroom, students can grow in their self-awareness of how contextual variables shape and inform their readings. We can talk to one another about a text's meaning potential and, in doing so, discover what matters most to us and why. Recurring encounters involve confrontation, which can be difficult and painful for students to engage without tuning out or tearing down. But with appropriate tools and rules of engagement, an effective teacher helps keep the conversation moving toward a more nuanced understanding of God, ourselves, and others.

Reading the Bible with people whose views we struggle to understand or respect is not simply something we do because diverse classrooms make it necessary. It is vital to creating classrooms that are more just. It requires not just exegetical and hermeneutical training but also intellectual humility—and the cultivation of relational skills.

One such skill is to engage in a confrontational conversation not by questioning a person's motives but by seeking to understand what influences their interpretation and behavior. This involves using words in disarming ways: *Can you tell me more? I'd like to understand where you're coming from. Or, What in the text led you to that conclusion?*

What makes our polarization so debilitating is that we cannot agree on our ends, let alone our means. But what if our theological schools could agree that the desire for God—not a degree to serve God—is the telos of theological education? The desire for wisdom is at its core a desire for God incarnate in Jesus Christ. The goal of a counterpolarizing pedagogy is not to persuade our opponents or prove them wrong but to gain a better understanding of their desires, which in turn helps us better understand our own. This shared end enlarges the scope of theological education and normalizes the need for it: it's for anyone who seeks to know and be known by God, even those with whom we vehemently disagree.

—Janette H. Ok, associate professor of New Testament at Fuller Theological Seminary

Simulation learning for pastors

A Catholic seminarian recently met with a couple who were grieving their son's suicide. During their conversation, he inexplicably became angry with them. They left in shock, resolving never to return.

This happened in a simulation at Mundelein Seminary, where I am rector and president, not in a real-life pastoral encounter. But the student's anger was real: the carefully designed simulation was so lifelike that he found himself reacting uncontrollably to unaddressed feelings about his sister's attempted suicide years before. Although he had excelled in his pastoral theology classes, he lacked the ability to show authentic compassion in the face of personal triggers. His academic performance did not enable faculty members to foresee this potential timebomb. But the simulation created a safe space in which he could fail—and then learn how to integrate his personal history rather than act out against it.

There is a pressing need to form future pastors in the art of compassion. At Mundelein, we have been developing a compassion-focused pedagogical model in collaboration with colleagues from the Rosalind Franklin University of Medicine and Science and the Hillebrand Center for Compassionate Care in Medicine at the University of Notre Dame. Hospitals have long played a role in training ministers through clinical pastoral education and similar programs. This gives us confidence that pastoral theology can benefit from medical research into compassion and how it is acquired, retained, and employed.

Dominic Vachon, director of the Hillebrand Center, has studied the science of compassion extensively and has developed a pedagogy for teaching medical students to nurture a “compassionate care mindset” as they tend to their patients. It requires them to gain a deep self-awareness of their interior thoughts and feelings, along with learning how to act effectively and compassionately in the face of empathic distress in others.

Vachon's approach integrates well into the traditional program for priestly formation at Catholic seminaries. The goal of this formation is for a seminarian to first grow deeply in self-knowledge and then gain self-possession—the ability to act appropriately in the face of stressors. Only then is he prepared to live his life as a self-gift to others, embracing self-sacrificial, compassionate love and receiving others as a gift to himself (as described in the creation narrative of Genesis 2). Drawing extensively from the Christian personalist anthropology of Pope John Paul II, we are working with Vachon to adapt his compassion methodology to the particular needs of priestly formation.

We are adapting our medical colleagues' work with simulation learning as well. Long a mainstay of medical education, simulation involves the use of specially trained professional actors who portray realistic pastoral encounters in authentic ministerial settings. We can simulate a wide range of possible experiences for our seminarians, which are recorded in a "simulation lab" constructed on campus. The primary goal is not to teach skills but rather to help the seminarian grow in self-knowledge and self-possession as he encounters a broad range of challenges within a safe environment. This approach fully leverages the inherently relational anthropology of John Paul II's personalism, wherein every person is a unique "subject-in-relationship."

As these collaborative programs infuse our wider curriculum, we are observing marked increases in the compassion mindsets of our students—and are hopeful for more compassionate future priests.

—John Kartje, rector and president of the University of St. Mary of the Lake and Mundelein Seminary

Preparing for divine encounter

Vineyard churches are communities where people come to expect that normal Christian life includes moments of transformative encounter with God. Our commitment to a lifestyle of expectancy rests on scripture's testimony that those who earnestly seek God will find God, often in surprising ways.

In the Vineyard, we teach people to expect the real presence of our living God: in the preached word, in vulnerable worship music, at the Lord's table, and in the works of mercy and power Jesus taught his disciples as expressions of divine love to a broken world. In God's presence, truth is revealed, healing begins, vocation is discerned, and lives are transformed. This is our joyful inheritance that we are glad to receive and to give away to our kids and our neighborhoods—to expect to encounter the presence, work, and power of God in our midst.

Yet the abundance of this inheritance brings challenges. First, not every persuasive voice or moving experience carries divine authority. Living amid an individualized, algorithmically curated flood of loud voices, few of which are rooted in tradition or accountability, we need more discernment, at more hours of the day, about more things than ever before.

Second, while we long to pass down a pure record of rightly hearing and obeying God, no teacher or church—save Jesus himself—can claim such perfection. Thus we require two kinds of discernment: discerning the voice of God among us and discerning the history of faithful response to revelation. In both instances, the compassionate word of God leads us toward repentance and a new way.

These twin needs frame the Vineyard's efforts in theological education across a wide range of institutions. This fall, the theology and education arm of Vineyard USA will append a conference gathering to the annual meeting of the Academy of American Religion and invite a group of "encounter-forward" churches to explore theories of divine transformation with us. We know that learning to hear and obey the Spirit requires criteria for interpretation and discernment, and we are expectant about gathering our community for the discussion and extending the invitation outward.

We are also working with Vineyard churches to design and launch pastoral residencies for two-year, cohort-based learning to support the practical theological education of would-be pastors on a regional basis. We know that theology practiced over time within a healthy community helps to form good criteria discernment. At the same time, we are forging seminary partnerships, because learning to think theologically in relationship to the diversities of the wider Christian communion strengthens our own capacity to be good hearers and doers of the Word.

The educational projects we are currently investing in can be described as seeking after theological education that brings together the discernment of the present and the discernment of the past, all for the sake of faithful obedience in the future. This is the theological education required for a church that expects transformational encounters with the living God.

—*Caleb Maskell, national director of theology and education, and Annie Dimond, theology and education project coordinator, at Vineyard USA.*

Forming lay teachers and learners

Ministry is changing, and one of the most important shifts is the growing number of ministers whose appointments do not require an MDiv or other graduate professional degree. Different denominations have different names for them, including local pastors, commissioned lay pastors, and certified lay ministers.

Candler School of Theology, where I teach, works with ecclesial partners in multiple mainline, evangelical, and charismatic/Pentecostal traditions. All of them are seeing growth in this category of pastoral leaders. These partners have helped us see three streams flowing into this growing river of lay ministers. One stream comes from new worshiping communities, often but not exclusively new immigrant communities, who expect that their pastoral leaders will have paid employment outside ministry. Another comes from congregations that once supported a full-time pastor with a graduate professional degree but now lack the resources to do so. A third comes from congregations with larger memberships and budgets that call leaders from within the congregation to move into roles on the pastoral staff.

These pastoral leaders may not be full-time professionals in the narrow sense of that word, but they can serve communities with extraordinary care, dedication, and pastoral wisdom. Indeed, I often feel called to account by their commitment. Many of them have the distinctive gift of coming from the communities they serve. Lay ministers therefore need an education that does not alienate them from their sending communities but prepares them for transformative leadership within them.

Candler has been partnering with La Asociación para la Educación Teológica Hispana and a diverse set of ecclesial partners to develop a mode of theological education specifically designed for lay ministers. This has led to the creation of La Mesa Academy for Theological Studies, a program that offers fully accredited courses culminating in a graduate certificate in ministry.

La Mesa is designed to be radically accessible. Students do not need an undergraduate degree to begin. Coursework is part time and mostly online, with instruction in English, Spanish, and Korean. Thanks to support from the Lilly Endowment—and growing support from ecclesial partners—tuition is very inexpensive or free. Teams of teachers bring together Candler faculty members, graduate students from Emory and other universities, and learned leaders of ecclesial communities who are working with us to create the program. This distinctive combination of teachers and learners makes for classes that are both academically excellent and deeply contextual.

Some La Mesa graduates will get all the formal theological education they need through the certificate. Others will use La Mesa as an accelerated on-ramp to an MDiv and beyond. We trust that all will be formed for the ministries to which God calls them.

—*Ted A. Smith, professor of divinity at Candler School of Theology at Emory University*

Learning at rest

In 2021 I started a ministry called Notes of Rest. It's a contemplative experience with scripture and Black music that invites the weary into the rest of God, blending spirituality with live music to serve the church, seminary, and world. I hope it can be both a healing balm for theological students and educators and a mode of theological education in itself.

Professors, classmates, and pastors I met as an MDiv student helped me find my way to establishing Notes of Rest. I wanted to address the abiding weariness I saw in theological education and the church. I also wanted to find a faithful expression of my own vocation, which blends artistic practice, academic study, and pastoral care. I hope that this project helps communities of faith practice rest in this age of exhaustion—and encourages students to imagine new forms of ministry in which they serve God faithfully with the fullness of their gifts.

Notes of Rest sessions involve three key components: contemplative engagement with scripture passages that address various kinds of rest (e.g., sabbath, sleep, slowness), attentive listening to music that I play on piano, and facilitated discussion about what people have just experienced. The sessions typically last 90 minutes but can scale up to overnight retreats and hybrid continuing education courses.

Looking for instances of rest in scripture, listening for the restfulness issuing from Black music, sharing about our experiences with rest and restlessness—this is a form of theological education. Adam's view of God changed after he awoke from his deep sleep to find another human, Eve, standing before him. Now to know God was to be known by another human. Music that comes from the Black tradition of spirituals, jazz harmonies, and improvising on well-known church music teaches the listener to regard music as a teacher comparable to the Bible. We can access rest through moans, blue notes, and creative uses of pauses in between the notes of our lives as much as we can through *lectio divina*. And talking candidly with one another about our experiences with the passages and the music teaches us about a God who cares about our lived experiences in our bodies as much as our intellects—an especially important reminder in academic settings.

Holy rest brings reflection and renewal. It also gives rise to joy—not least for me. It has been a joy to steward this ministry and experiment in theological education that marries our intellect, our emotions, our souls, and our bodies. What a wondrous knowledge of God.

—*Julian Davis Reid, an artist-theologian based in Chicago*