

# Research Report: Transformation Theological Education 1.0 Grand Rapids Theological Seminary

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## **ABSTRACT**

*A three-part study funded by the Kern Family Foundation was conducted to inform faculty and administrators on how to shape seminary curriculum that prepares graduates for effective pastoral ministry. Participants included pastors from evangelical Christian churches in five of the Midwestern United States. In part one pastors were asked to list competencies and dispositions that they believe are essential to effective pastoral ministry, and the experiences that are most influential in developing those qualities. The results yielded a set of essential competencies and dispositions and a foundation for understanding the most influential experiences. In part two the competencies and dispositions were further clarified through a series of six focus groups. In addition, eight experiences were identified as very influential in effectively developing those qualities. In part three participants ranked the 21 competencies and dispositions from “Not at all important” to “Extremely important” and selected the three factors that are most influential in developing each quality. This research suggests that seminaries can fulfill three distinct roles in equipping pastors to be effective in ministry. A seminary is a primary provider in the “knowledge” competencies, an essential partner in developing “skills,” and a seminary can assess, guide, and report in regards to “character,” or dispositions. This research promises practical utility to the faculty and administration of theological schools. More broadly, the findings and implications of this study are relevant to pastors, churches, Christian educational institutions, philanthropic foundations, and agencies involved with the personal and professional development of pastors in the United States.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

The purpose of this study was to further understand what knowledge, skills, and character is necessary for individuals to function effectively in pastoral ministry, and the role that seminaries should fulfill in equipping pastors. Our study specifically sought insights from current pastors from a variety of backgrounds, serving in diverse contexts. This follows a straightforward rationale: the wisdom and experience of current pastors should speak into the development processes of future pastors. Congregants, church staff members, and theological scholars are among those who should also contribute to the task of shaping an effective seminary curriculum. The rich input from experienced pastors, however, is often overlooked and highly valuable and was therefore the focus of this study.

Our study began with a two-part question:

- What competencies and dispositions are essential for effective pastoral ministry and how are those fostered?

We divided this guiding question into its constituent parts in order to develop the questions that we would pose to the research participants in various forms.

- What are the areas of knowledge, kinds of skills, and character (attitudes/disposition) that are essential to effective pastoral ministry?
- What education, professional, and life experiences are most influential in developing those qualities?

We pursued our research questions in a three-part study. Each of the three parts were integrated and the data was progressively analyzed. That is, the analysis of the data from the first part informed the structure and direction of the second part. The data from the first part was analyzed again with the data from the second part, which informed the structure and direction of the third part. An analysis of all three parts together informs the following discussion and potential implications.

## **PART ONE**

The purpose of this study was to describe what current pastors believe are the essential competencies for effective pastoral ministry and how those are formed. In the first part of our study we deployed a survey of open-ended questions by email and post to pastors at evangelical Christian churches in Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, Ohio, and Wisconsin. Using open-ended questions is a method that approaches each participant with a posture of humility. That is, the method allows us to begin the entire research project with “raw” insights from pastors rather than limiting the final results by beginning with our assumptions. We asked participants to list three to five competencies for each area (knowledge, skills, and character) that they believe are essential for effective pastoral ministry. In addition, we asked them to list the education and/or experiences that were most influential in developing those qualities in them.

At the end of the survey we asked participants to provide demographic information that could help us discern if certain competencies or dispositions were deemed “essential” in one setting over another (e.g., urban, rural, suburban) or according to levels of experience

(e.g., highest education level achieved, years in ministry). We will return to a discussion of the differences we discovered in following sections.

The survey was deployed to pastors (youth, associate, and senior/solo) and churches in the designated States using addresses purchased from third party, for-profit companies. Nearly 700 pastors completed the survey, yielding a very large data set of words, phrases, and sentences. We collapsed the data set by identifying synonymous responses. For instance, “Greek/Hebrew” and “biblical languages” were collapsed into a single competency, “Languages.” Similarly, we identified summary terms that allowed us to group similar descriptions in the data set of influencing factors. For instance, “hard knocks of life” and “growing up in a Christian family” were collapsed into “Family & Life Experience.” We used the competencies and influencing factors that pastors most often listed as the starting place for part two of our study.

## **PART TWO**

The limitations of an online/paper survey required that we seek further clarification from pastors in the work of analyzing their responses. In the second part of our study we convened six focus groups of pastoral leaders from diverse contexts and backgrounds. The purpose of part two of this study was to explore with greater depth the meaning of the competencies and influencing factors identified in part one. Six focus groups convened over a four-week period, four in Michigan and one in Illinois. Participants were selected from rural, suburban, and urban contexts. One group was comprised entirely of women and another group was comprised of pastors who serve in churches with membership that is predominantly African American.

In preparation, our team was professionally trained to design and facilitate focus groups. Together we designed the protocol and strategically selected participants. A research team member served as note taker for four of the groups, and every focus group session was voice recorded to ensure accurate and retrievable data. Each research team member debriefed the sessions with a written summary and reactions. In addition, we shared with each other what we learned in a series of “meaning making” sessions in which we also reviewed the responses from part one. That analysis resulted in a list of 21 competencies and 8 influencing factors that served as the foundation for part three of our study.

## **PART THREE**

We began part three of our study by developing clear and concise definitions of the competencies and the experiences that best foster those competencies based upon the findings of the first two parts of our study. They are listed in Table 1.0 and Table 2.0 respectively.

Part three of our study served three purposes. The first purpose was to verify how “essential” each of the 21 competencies is for effective pastoral ministry. The second purpose was to understand which factors are most influential in developing each competency. The third purpose was to gain a better understanding of how these differ for pastors according to gender, race/ethnicity, level of education achieved, church setting, and size of church. We deployed an online questionnaire through email using a list

purchased from a third party, for-profit company to pastors (youth, associate, and senior/solo) at evangelical Christian churches in Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, Ohio, and Wisconsin. We asked participants to rank, from “Not at all important” to “Extremely important,” how important each of the 21 competencies is for effective pastoral ministry. In addition, we asked participants to select the top three experiences that best foster each competency.

A total of 571 pastors responded, but we only used the 453 questionnaires that were complete, including the “General Consent to Participate in Research.” In preparation for analyzing the data, we converted the 7 possible ranks for each competency and the 8 possible influencing factors into numeric values separately. The average of how important pastors believe each competency is for effective pastoral ministry is listed in Table 3.0. The average of what pastors believe the three most influential experiences are for fostering each competency is listed in Table 4.0.

TABLE 1.0 TWENTY-ONE COMPETENCIES DEFINED

COMPETENCY	DEFINITION
Bible	Understands the themes and content of Scripture
Church History	Understands historical development of the Church including denominational history
Languages	Able to utilize Greek and Hebrew and related resources in the study of Scripture
Theology	Foundational beliefs of one’s own and other Christian traditions
Pastoral Theology & Care	Provides care for congregants from a theologically informed perspective
Cultural Awareness	Understands and responds to attitudes, beliefs and values of local community and broader context
Administration	Ability to organize and manage self, people, and resources
Counseling	Ability to listen to, encourage, and guide people to experience wholeness rooted in Christ
Exegesis	Knowledge and skills to interpret and apply Scripture
Interpersonal Skills	Ability to relate with people in an open, affirming and direct manner
Leadership	Ability to influence others to live out the Biblical values and to pursue a shared vision
Preaching	Ability to proclaim Biblical truth in a manner that connects with your listeners to motivate transformation
Teaching	Ability to communicate Biblical information in a way that people understand
Humility	Teachable, servant’s heart, accepts criticism
Impartial	Fair-minded, not choosing favorites, not rushing to judgment
Integrity	Being honest, trustworthy, moral and genuine
Loving	Love for God and others, compassionate and forgiving
Patient	Slow to anger, calm
Positive	Joyful, optimistic, friendly
Resilient	Persevering, committed, and faithful through complex relationships and circumstances
Self-Aware	Understanding one’s own giftedness, personality, and emotional health

TABLE 2.0 EIGHT INFLUENCING FACTORS DEFINED

<b>INFLUENCE</b>	<b>DEFINITION</b>
Family & Life Experience	Family environment and broader life experiences
Formal Theological Education	Academic preparation through Christian college and/or seminary
Formal Higher Education	Academic preparation through other college and/or graduate education
Mentorship	Support and wisdom from a trusted and experienced advisor
Internship	Supervised training in the context of ministry
Church Involvement	Participation in church ministries as a congregant
Ministry Leadership	Vocational work in the context of church or para-church organization
Lifelong Learning	Conferences, workshops, self-directed study, and/or reflection

TABLE 3.0 PASTORAL COMPETENCIES RANKED BY LEVEL OF IMPORTANCE

<b>RANK</b>	<b>SCORE</b>
Not at all important	-3
Low importance	-2
Slightly important	-1
Neutral	0
Moderately important	1
Very important	2
Extremely important	3
<b>COMPETENCY</b>	<b>SCORE</b>
Integrity	2.91
Bible	2.79
Loving	2.73
Exegesis	2.62
Preaching	2.53
Theology	2.45
Humility	2.44
Teaching	2.44
Interpersonal Skills	2.40
Resilient	2.28
Leadership	2.22
Self-Aware	2.14
Patient	2.09
Impartial	2.06
Pastoral Theology & Care	2.00
Positive	1.97
Cultural Awareness	1.63
Administration	1.54
Counseling	1.53
Church History	1.46
Languages	0.74

TABLE 4.0 MOST INFLUENTIAL EXPERIENCES FOR FOSTERING EACH COMPETENCY

KNOWLEDGE	SKILLS	CHARACTER
<b>Bible</b>	<b>Administration</b>	<b>Humility</b>
Formal Theological Education	Ministry Leadership	Family & Life Experience
Lifelong Learning	Church Involvement	Lifelong Learning
Family & Life Experience	Lifelong Learning	Mentorship
<b>Church History</b>	<b>Counseling</b>	<b>Impartial</b>
Formal Theological Education	Formal Theological Education	Family & Life Experience
Formal Higher Education	Formal Higher Education	Lifelong Learning
Lifelong Learning	Family & Life Experience	Ministry Leadership
<b>Languages</b>	<b>Exegesis</b>	<b>Integrity</b>
Formal Theological Education	Formal Theological Education	Family & Life Experience
Formal Higher Education	Lifelong Learning	Lifelong Learning
Lifelong Learning	Formal Higher Education	Ministry Leadership
<b>Theology</b>	<b>Interpersonal Skills</b>	<b>Loving</b>
Formal Theological Education	Family & Life Experience	Family & Life Experience
Lifelong Learning	Lifelong Learning	Lifelong Learning
Church Involvement	Mentorship	Church Involvement
<b>Pastoral Theology &amp; Care</b>	<b>Leadership</b>	<b>Patient</b>
Mentorship	Ministry Leadership	Family & Life Experience
Formal Theological Education	Mentorship	Lifelong Learning
Family & Life Experience	Family & Life Experience	Mentorship
<b>Cultural Awareness</b>	<b>Preaching</b>	<b>Positive</b>
Family & Life Experience	Formal Theological Education	Family & Life Experience
Lifelong Learning	Lifelong Learning	Lifelong Learning
Church Involvement	Church Involvement	Mentorship
	<b>Teaching</b>	<b>Resilient</b>
	Formal Theological Education	Family & Life Experience
	Church Involvement	Lifelong Learning
	Formal Higher Education	Mentorship
		<b>Self-Awareness</b>
		Family & Life Experience
		Lifelong Learning
		Mentorship

**FINDINGS**

The research question that guided this study was:

- What competencies and dispositions are essential for effective pastoral ministry and how are those fostered?

This three-part study identified twenty-one (21) competencies and dispositions that pastors believe are essential for effective pastoral ministry, and eight (8) ways in which they are best fostered. Reaching a definition for each competency and formative influence, being grounded in the experience of hundreds of pastors, is a valuable finding from this research (cf. Table 1.0; Table 2.0). Furthermore, identifying the top three most influential factors for each competency (cf. Table 4.0) is a finding that can be useful for

pastors, churches, Christian educational institutions, philanthropic foundations, and agencies involved with the personal and professional development of pastors in the United States.

Clear patterns emerged from our study concerning the most formative influences for certain pastoral competencies (cf. Table 4.0). The following discussion reveals the nature of those patterns by organizing the twenty-one competencies into three broad clusters: knowledge, skills, and character. Data from *each* part of the research warrants this kind of clustering of competencies; however, findings from the survey (part one) and focus groups (part two) also reveal an integrated relationship between these clusters.

*Knowledge-based competencies.* Data indicate that pastors highly value the formative influence of formal theological education in the development of knowledge competencies. Participants ranked formal theological education as the primary or secondary formative influence in five of six knowledge-based competencies: Bible, church history, languages, theology, pastoral theology and care.

*Skill-based competencies.* The influential factor “Formal Theological Education” also ranked as the primary formative influence for developing four of the seven skill-oriented competencies: counseling, exegesis, preaching and teaching. The influential factor “Ministry leadership,” defined as vocational work in the context of a church or para-church organization, was ranked as the top formative influence for developing administration and leadership skills. These findings suggest that the complex work of training pastors is a shared responsibility.

Research data revealed a close relationship between several knowledge-based and skill-based competencies. For example, exegesis was often described as a skill that requires several areas of knowledge, such as Bible, theology, and languages. In this case, pastors ranked formal theological education as the primary influence for developing many of the skills and knowledge areas associated with exegesis. However, the case was different for other competencies, such as preaching. Information gained in focus groups suggests that theological education is useful in providing knowledge and methodology for formulating sermons. However, the actual skill of preaching is best developed in a more dynamic, organic setting, such as a congregational worship service, rather than a homiletics laboratory.

*Character-based competencies.* Pastors overwhelmingly report “Family & Life Experience” as the most influencing factor for developing character. Family and life experience was ranked first in all eight dispositions: humility, impartial, integrity, loving, patient, positive, resilient, and self-aware. Furthermore, character qualities consistently ranked as most essential for effective pastoral ministry. About 80% of respondents from the survey in part one of our study listed integrity as an essential disposition for pastoral ministry, which was significantly higher than any other competency. As one focus group participant said: “Without these [dispositions] you have no ministry.”

The results from this three-part study suggest that those who seek to equip pastors for effective ministry should orient their approach with at least the following four things in mind.

First, mentorship consistently ranked higher than internships as a formative experience, even among competencies where ministry experience would seem to be more influential (e.g. pastoral care and theology, preaching, teaching). Questionnaire data differed to some extent from what focus group participants emphasized: the need for practical ministry experience. This seems to suggest that early ministry experiences are most effective if they are coupled with strong support from a trusted advisor.

Second, survey and focus group participants seemed to express “Exegesis” and “Languages” as very similar, if not the same. However, in all three parts of our study nearly all participants placed high value on exegesis, but the ability to use the original languages was significantly less valued (cf. Table 3.0). Future research should investigate the significance and impact of using the biblical languages in seminary studies *and* the use of biblical languages for exegesis over a full career of pastoral ministry.

Third, the results of this research suggest that there may be differences in the level of importance that men and women place on formal theological education. For instance, the information gained from female participants in the focus groups and questionnaire seems to suggest that women view formal theological education as a gateway or validation of ministerial competence. In addition, female participants – when compared to male participants – tended to rank knowledge-based competencies as more important than the skill or character-based competencies.

Finally, research participants represented a diverse set of ministry contexts. Part three of our study, the questionnaire, revealed no statistically significant difference in responses based upon rural, suburban, or urban church setting in all areas except for one. Pastors from churches in urban settings consistently ranked “Cultural Awareness” higher than their peers who serve in rural and suburban settings.

### **REFLECTIONS & POTENTIAL IMPLICATIONS**

This study provides empirical knowledge from pastors that faculty and administrators can use to design programs for equipping pastors to be effective in ministry. In general, the findings would caution against recommendations based upon sharp distinctions between the three competency clusters of knowledge, skills, and character. That is, significant overlap in these clusters emerged throughout the three-part study. So, while the following recommendations address the specific clusters in a systematic manner, we acknowledge each competency as important, in fact, essential (as the data shows).

*Mission, curricula, pedagogy.* The expert knowledge and practical wisdom of seminary professors is a valuable resource and is perceived to play an important role in the intellectual and professional development of pastors. While recognizing that pastoral ministry requires more than knowledge and skill competencies, preparation in these areas should remain a central focus of seminary education. At the same time, given the

importance of family and life experience in the development of pastors, theological educators would be wise to nurture values and practices that integrate various kinds of learning. That is, how could pedagogy, curricula, and programming better integrate the expert knowledge and practical wisdom of educators with the prior (and future) learning and life experiences of pastors in training? This research suggests that practices should encourage the various and complex roles of seminaries (instructing, partnering, assessing, guiding, mentoring, etc.) across mission, curricula, and pedagogy.

*Beyond formal theological education.* Pastors view the experiences that occur *beyond* the walls and programming of seminaries to be more influential in developing Christian character than those afforded by formal theological education. The fact that formal theological education is not ranked as a highly formative influence on character does not necessarily minimize the role of seminaries. Rather, the findings serve as a reminder that the complex work of training pastors is a shared responsibility. Preparation for ministry is not and cannot be solely the work of seminaries and Bible colleges. Care should be taken to ensure that the educational experience does not create a disconnection between those being trained and the people they are preparing to serve.

*Partnerships, internships, and mentorship.* Many of the competencies most essential for effective pastoral ministry are best fostered through involvement in church life and a breadth of personal life experience. Others are best gained through “on the job” experiences. Formal higher education should seek to encourage and maximize these experiences. It would be wise to pursue greater innovative collaboration between seminaries and local churches since significant elements of ministerial development occur within the practice of ministry. How can seminaries partner with local churches in more innovative ways? Beyond current forms of mentorship and internship, what other strategies could create partnerships that more effectively grow and develop future pastors and ministry leaders? What are the implications of this data for the current curriculum model? Is there an argument here for greater “contextualized education” beyond the types of internships that current might have pastors experienced?

*Understanding diversity.* This research suggests that training institutions would be wise to gain a deeper understanding of the different needs that women and men have for professional and personal development in ministry. For example, what issues confront women when they pursue full-time ministry? How is the progress of one's ministry vocation variably impacted by gender in different settings? Institutions will better serve and support their increasingly diverse student populations by understanding these issues more deeply.

## **LIMITATIONS**

Participants in the first and third parts of this study (survey and questionnaire) were largely a homogenous group - generally characterized as white males with formal theological education and more than ten years of ministry experience. Due to a clerical oversight, gender was not included in the first part (open-ended survey) of our study. We were mindful of these potential demographic shortcomings from the beginning of this study, so we intentionally elicited insights from women in ministry and pastors of color

in the focus groups. The results of the focus groups suggested some differences in both essential competencies and formative influences based on ethnicity, but the sample size for participants of color was too small to draw firm conclusions. Future research should include a more diverse group of participants that could verify potentially statistically significant differences.

The data gained from this study is too large to procure all of the potential implications in a single project. We were not able to bring each of the purposes of each part of the study to fruition in this report because of natural limitations like time and content focus.

### **FURTHER RESEARCH**

Based upon our experience in this three-part study, we make the following recommendations for future research.

1. Future research should seek to better understand how race/ethnicity might correlate with essential pastoral competencies and how they are formed.
2. In what ways, can theological education provide opportunities for evaluation and reflection on character development? Mindful of the challenges of measuring character, what practices can seminaries employ to observe, assess, guide and/or report about a student's character? How can these responsibilities be shared with local churches, denominations, and current pastors?
3. Internship and mentorship models have varied over time and in different academic and ministry contexts. How can these formative influences be assessed? The foci of future research could include length of internship, types of mentoring relationships, and ministry opportunities.
4. Family and life experience was a central formative influence for many of the essential pastoral competencies. What kinds experiences are most formative? What are the implications of family background and life experience for those who are (or who are not) encouraged to pursue pastoral ministry?
5. How could the ministry competencies identified in this study be utilized to identify and mentor future pastors and ministry leaders? Could instruments that measure ministerial competence be created using the findings from this research?
6. What strategies are most effective for seminaries to foster in pastors the skills and motivation to be lifelong learners?
7. What, if any, significant areas of ministerial competence are not included in this study? For example, evangelization is minimally represented as a pastoral responsibility in this survey, but is nonetheless an essential component of what a pastor does. Why wasn't this aspect of pastoral service more prominently reflected in the input that pastors provided for this study? What practical support can seminaries provide to pastors for this important area of pastoral ministry?

### **IDENTIFICATION OF RESEARCH TEAM**

**John Bonnell** is a doctoral student at Michigan State University studying Higher & Adult Education and African Studies, and working with the Tanzania Partnership Program, an interdisciplinary research and development initiative. John completed the BA at Wheaton College (1996) and the MDiv at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School (2004). After a decade of pastoral ministry in the Midwest, John served for four years on the faculty and administration of Scott Theological College in Kenya.

**Dallas Lenear** is the Executive Pastor of New Hope Baptist Church, Grand Rapids, MI. Originally from Flint, MI, Dallas moved to Grand Rapids to attend Grand Rapids Theological Seminary where he earned the Master of Divinity degree in 2003. He and wife Senita are parents of a daughter and a son. He is passionate about equipping Christians to handle God's money God's way.

**Ken Vanderwest** serves as Pastor of Christian Education at Kent City Baptist Church, a growing church on the outskirts of Grand Rapids, MI. He is a graduate of Cedarville College and Grand Rapids Theological Seminary (MDiv). His education fostered a deep desire to see people come to love God as He is revealed in His Word. He and his wife Rhonda have four children.

**John VerBerkmoes** serves as Vice President and Academic Dean for Grand Rapids Theological Seminary of Cornerstone University. He is completing his 23<sup>rd</sup> year at Cornerstone University, having served in a variety of administrative roles. John completed a bachelor's degree at Cornerstone University (1986), a master's degree at Grand Rapids Theological Seminary (1988), and later completed the doctor of philosophy in educational administration at Michigan State University-HALE Program (2006).

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