Theological Field Education offers opportunity for the practice of ministry alongside supportive supervision, peer group and congregational feedback. The process is designed to create space for reflection so that the minister-in-training can grow in self-awareness, maturity and competency for ministry. It is not just about learning skills for a task, but growing as people and learning to think as professional ministers.

Matthew Floding, the editor of the volume, is Director of Formation for Ministry at Western Theological Seminary in Holland, Michigan, and chair of the Association for Theological Field Education. He and the ten other writers are keen advocates for the value of theological field education but also sharp commentators on what makes a quality program. They explore the nature of field education and its transformational goals; the practicalities of case studies, theological reflection and assessment; and the particularities of the role of congregations, supervisors, peers and cross-cultural placements. They also cover ministerial ethics and covenants, and self-care and community in ministry.

One distinctive theme of the book is congregations as indispensable partners. Trained supervisors and empathetic peers, as well as quality field education faculty, are essential. But it is also important to understand the place of congregations, and to help students understand the nature of their unique culture, ecology, resources, processes and need for different sorts of leadership. The book begins to indicate why some congregations are especially generative as leadership farms for ministers-in-training, but there is room for more research on this. But it is significant that theological field education programs can be good for the congregation as well the student, as Lee Carroll suggests:

“Ministerial formation is not best understood as one generation of clergy handing off insights and traditions to the next generation of clergy. It is the work of the whole church. Theological discernment by clergy and laity together not only creates a generative context for theological field education but also defines a way for church members to grow in their common vocation as the people of God.” (p.98)

Another key theme is that the best supervisors, mentors and teachers invite the student to join them in the art and dance of ministry. Ministry is an art not just a set of skills, and so is teaching theological field education. Charlene Jin Lee comments on the value of a student watching and working alongside a seasoned minister, and having the space and permission for authentic conversation about the joys and helplessness of ministry situations:

“The teacher who is unsatisfied with flighty answers to deep questions participates in the formation of a student who will contemplate the questions of ultimate meaning. The teacher who perceives the unknowability of God participates in the formation of a student who stands before truth with reverence. The teacher who creates space for others to interact with the living text of the Divine participates in the formation of a student who extends hospitality to the spiritually homeless so prevalent in our midst.” (p.30)

Welcome to Theological Field Education is an outstanding introductory volume and highly recommended for faculty, supervisors, students and congregations interested in best practice for field education, all for the purpose of nurturing the next generation of ministry leaders.

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