

DISCERNMENT

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Launching a New Journal: Problems, Questions, Answers, and Hopes

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DISCERNMENT

Theology and the Practice of Ministry

Launching a New Journal: Problems, Questions, Answers, and Hopes

Ron Bruner

Abstract: *In the initial pages of this journal, we provide an explanation of its mission—rigorous and accessible conversation among those working at the intersection of theology and ministerial practice. We list the obstacles to that conversation, and the means by which this journal overcomes them. This essay also imagines and describes various settings in which an e-journal containing the work of scholar-practitioners might usefully serve the academy and the church.*

This issue of *Discernment: Theology and the Practice of Ministry* marks the birth of a new journal. Carson Reed has imagined this journal and the Siburt Institute for Christian Ministry will publish it. It moves forward under the guidance of a clear mission statement:

Discernment: Theology and the Practice of Ministry will encourage effective ministerial practice by making practical theology accessible to the church. It will do so through publishing essays that engage rigorous theoretical and theological reflection with contextually sensitive ministerial action, thus providing exemplary models of praxis serving God's preferred future.

This aim is rooted in a simple, pragmatic idea: to make the hard-won learning resulting from years of practical theological work available to the church such work seeks to serve.

The mission of *Discernment* empowers it to present a broad range of work at the intersection of praxis and scholarship: summaries of Doctor of Ministry theses or key aspects of that work; retrospectives that examine how the work done in a project five or more years ago continues to function

or evolve in the work of the minister or ministry; re-contextualization and application of previously documented ministerial interventions to a new situation; and essays by scholar-practitioners bringing theology, theory, and practice together in creative and effective ways. The notion of publishing summaries of project theses merits further explanation.

Every Doctor of Ministry (DMin) candidate invests a significant part of their ministerial and scholarly life in their project thesis. They spend months identifying an issue in their ministry, one significant enough to require a major intervention and yet not so large or intractable as to be unsolvable. After scouring the library for resources—biblical, theological, philosophical, or social scientific—they imagine potential perspectives that point toward possible solutions. With their peers and faculty committee they evaluate differing intervention approaches and measurement methodologies in terms of what works while still cohering with the theology of their project. After successfully obtaining administrative approval of their prospectus, they begin months of work in the field implementing their intervention. When they complete their intervention and its evaluation (qualitative or quantitative), the writing intensifies. Eventually there is a thesis defense and rewriting. Roughly a year of their life ends up on expensive paper, carefully bound, and neatly shelved in the stacks of their degree-granting institution.

A few project theses acquire a life and reputation of their own, at least in ministry circles. For example, among knowledgeable youth ministers in Churches of Christ in the 1990s, Tommy King's DMin thesis¹ captured serious attention, not just for the quality of his intervention and its effectiveness, but also for the thoughtfulness of the theology of children that funded it. A few authors are even able to convert portions of their project thesis into a published and more widely available book; Wipf & Stock has, for example, published portions of Brady Bryce's thesis² from Fuller Theological Seminary as the highly useful *Echoing the Story: Living the Art of Listening*.³

Unfortunately, most doctoral project thesis volumes sit on library shelves where they are rarely disturbed and almost predictably available. This is a fate no author desires for their work.

¹ Tommy W. King, "Faith Decisions: Christian Initiation for Children of the Glenwood Church of Christ," (DMin thesis, Abilene Christian University, 1994).

² Brady Bryce, "Echoing the Story of God: The Journey of Catechesis as Story, Transformation, and Evangelism" (DMin thesis, Fuller Theological Seminary, 2008).

³ Brady Bryce, *Echoing the Story: Living the Art of Listening* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2010).

Correcting the Relative Inaccessibility of DMin Work

Even though project theses are public documents that are openly available to the church and public through library systems, there remain a number of obstacles that limit accessibility to this work. In my experience, at least four problems underlie inaccessibility to the dormant potential of DMin project theses: awareness, location, scholarly language, and the size of the work. As a journal, *Discernment* addresses all of these problems.

Publishers make readers aware of their newest books by spending a significant portion of a book's potential revenue on marketing that book. In the existing scheme of things, there is no similar mechanism informing readers of the latest DMin theses on the shelves at the local seminary. *Discernment* will make information about promising DMin work openly available to its subscribers and to those who visit its pages on the Digital Commons. Subscribers can choose to receive email notifications when the journal publishes new issues (hopefully at least twice per year) to the Digital Commons.

Theological libraries (and their librarians!) are gifts from God; faculty and students have ready access. Many practitioners, though, no longer have unlimited access to such a library, even if they live close to one, and many do not. Some universities are now making theses openly available for download through the Digital Commons, but even at Abilene Christian University only 13 project theses out of over 100 theses completed in that program (at the date of this article's publication) are so available. Articles in *Discernment* can increase the accessibility of this scholarship by moving the available location of the concepts in project theses from library shelves to the computing device in front of the reader.

Even when a project thesis is available, some readers might need an interpreter to decode the theological or methodological language encrypting some of them. The intent is to keep the language in *Discernment* accessible and to define terms that are technical or which acquire special definition in the work at hand.

Finally, a primary advantage of *Discernment* is the ability to present the concepts described in a book of 50 - 75,000 words in length within an article of 5 - 6,000 words. In the time a reader might spend on one thesis, they could read articles about 10 to 12 projects. The reader can research the practical theological work done in a specific area with a reasonable commitment of time and then, with the most relevant work identified, dig into the lengthier descriptions found in the complete project theses.

Answering the “So What” Question

If we provisionally grant that the journal *Discernment* will help remove barriers between the church and DMin work, we still haven't answered practical theology's ultimate question: “So what?” What good can come from this effort? Perhaps the “So what?” question can better be approached by answering the question, “So where?” Once ideas are located in a place or a perspective, the purpose for discussing them becomes clearer. Where will a journal publishing work at the intersection of theology and practice be useful?

Discernment will be useful to Doctor of Ministry students as they prepare for their project thesis. The ability to more rapidly discover lacunae in the span of scholarship can help these scholar-practitioners fill interesting or useful gaps. They may also find clues for useful intervention or assessment methodologies from projects with an entirely different context or theology. Such awareness could improve the quality of work in this discipline.

With the availability of this journal, faculty members serving on doctoral committees could more readily stay abreast of DMin scholarship. That knowledge would help them better guide DMin students, allow for a cross-fertilization of methodologies from other institutions, and inform their teaching work in the classroom with graduate and undergraduate students. Even faculty members who did not normally serve on these committees could benefit.

Ministers, though situated in unique contexts, could evaluate concepts that were successful in other environments. They could discern whether those interventions, or ideas from them, might be effective in their own context and benefit from the authors' evaluations of ways those projects might have been more effective. Awareness of these ministerial interventions might also stimulate ministers to seek conversations with authors leading to expanded relationships, resources, and ministerial wisdom.

Church or ministry leaders will be able to expand their horizons beyond their current context and study careful evaluations of ministerial projects; such study might persuade them to launch, or dissuade them from launching, other similar interventions. In some cases, careful reading of articles in *Discernment* alongside ministers or consultants might empower leaders to find assurance in the benefits innovative interventions might bring to their congregation or community.

Consultants working with local congregations would be able to expand both their knowledge base and their consulting “toolboxes.” One of

the strengths of the consulting work of Dr. Charles Siburt among Churches of Christ was his encyclopedic knowledge of the promising practices (and best practices) developed in DMin interventions. The journal *Discernment* empowers other consultants to strengthen their work in similar ways.

Moving Forward

When Tim Sensing edited *The Effective Practice of Ministry*, he explained: “My motive for showcasing DMin project theses is rooted in my conviction that good theology makes a difference in the lives of people.”⁴ We agree. Good theology does make a difference in the lives of people—individually and collectively. As this journal moves forward, one hope of the volunteer editorial board working behind the scenes of this journal is that *Discernment* will present substantial theology and wise practice that glorifies God, serves God’s ongoing purposes, and enriches the lives of people.

Other hopes have to do with the careers of those holding DMin degrees. The Doctor of Ministry degree is an advanced professional degree, not a “research” degree; this reality does not require, though, that the project thesis will be the last documented scholarly praxis of the one holding the degree. Scholarship should not end with a thesis, but instead be an ongoing lifestyle. This journal is one mechanism to help keep scholar-practitioners engaged in both parts of their identity.

The e-journal format of *Discernment* also gives cause for hope. This format should empower the journal to be available, sustainable, ecologically sensitive, and measurable in outreach. The only threshold between the journal and the reader is Internet access; this lowers the threshold as much as possible in our world. The journal should be economically sustainable because: (1) it is a volunteer effort and (2) it exists in digital format; there are no salaries to pay or paper to purchase. Because these articles or issues never need exist on paper, we do our part in saving trees and avoiding landfills. Finally, the very nature of the Digital Commons allows the reach of each article to be measured in quantity, time, and location. Admittedly, the downloading of an article does not guarantee the reading of its contents, much less its implementation. The number of downloads, though, does indicate the number of potentially transformative opportunities each work has had with interested searchers.

⁴ See p. 20, Tim Sensing, “Preface,” in *The Effective Practice of Ministry* (ed., Tim Sensing; Abilene: ACU Press, 2013), 17-21.

The editorial team of *Discernment: Theology and the Practice of Ministry* invites you to follow this journal as it moves forward. In a sense, it is a ministry intervention itself, the shape of which we do not yet fully understand and the effect of which we have yet to measure. Please engage in this project with us; read and share articles of interest to you or your community. Consider inviting potential authors to submit their work. We look forward to the conversations this journal will soon engage and empower.

*Ron Bruner, DMin, is the editor of **Discernment: Theology and the Practice of Ministry**. He has served as the executive director of the Westview Boys' Home in Hollis, Oklahoma since 1999. Bruner currently serves as the president of the board of Christian Child and Family Services Association. He has a BS in Business and an MA in Ministry from Oklahoma Christian University. Bruner did MDiv and DMin work at Abilene Christian University, which he completed in 2010. He has a scholarly interest in practical theology, especially in the areas of intergenerational, student, and children's ministry. Alongside Dana Kennamer Pemberton, Bruner has co-edited a book available in September 2015: **Along the Way: Conversations about Children and Faith**. His work has paid particular attention to at-risk youth and their unique challenges.*