

Doctor of Ministry Practicum Report

regarding Candi Dugas, M. Div.

a documentary theatre project, as part of fulfilling D.Min. degree requirements

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Overview:

Consisting of three phases (Conversation, Writing, and Presentation), this year-long practicum used theatrical presentations as a beneficial ministry tool to effectively express people's faith journey. We also asked the question: How vital and relevant is the Christian Church today? The three phases allowed participants the flexibility of short-term commitments. The Conversation Phase included five participants, one who also participated in the Presentation Phase, another who participated in the Writing Phase, and one who contributed to all three phases. The other two participants ended their commitment after the Conversation Phase. During the Presentation Phase we added four new participants. At the practicum's conclusion we had a total of 10 participants, nine who were over 40 years old, seven women and three men. All participants were screened and signed participation covenants (*consent forms*) that included a pledge of confidentiality. They also received a list of pastoral counseling resources if they ever felt they needed such support.

Student's Assessment:

So incredibly blessed I was from the participants of this project. Their sincere support of my endeavor was evident the moment they answered the recruiting call. They wanted it to succeed as much as I did, encouraging me to continue to raise relevant questions and to write beyond the scope of this project. The sharing of portions of their life histories and the giving of their time I found truly insightful and special. Even with a range of connections to the church, most of us found the commonalities of **family, food, and socializing** as we shared our memories. One participant attended a catholic boarding school in Jamaica and contributed a different experience of church and faith. I found it interesting that the top three themes of the group's memories did not include any of the hallmarks of our faith that the Church deems important – sacraments, confirmation, sermons, conversion experiences, bible/small group studies, etc.

Writing the script did not involve as many of the participants as I'd planned. Rather than it being a group effort, it became a collaboration between two of the participants and me. They created the characters and the seed for the storyline. With their input, I developed the story and wrote a script for the first act of a full-length play, "no ordinary sunday". While most of the memories shared focused on family, food, and socializing, "no ordinary sunday" focuses on the Church's vitality and relevancy (*or lack of*) regarding female/male romantic relationships. During the group's analysis of the Conversation Phase they expressed contentment with the church's vitality and relevancy related to their stories. They were quite displeased, however, with the Church's lack of specific guidance or instruction regarding their personal

"I was pleasantly surprised at the amount of thought-provoking conversations. Conversation continues between myself & other cast and friends." ~Project Participant

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relationships. They also expressed frustration with the lack of real-world explanations from the guidance and instructions they did receive. So the characters' experiences in "no ordinary sunday" represent how the participants experience(d) the Church. This piece also reflects the questions the group wants answered.

Each presentation confirmed for me the need to discuss with the people the Church's vitality and relevancy and how these discussions are critical to people's faith journeys. Such creativity and discussions can help deepen folks' relationships with themselves, God, and others by presenting areas that may be uncomfortable and/or that affect them in unconscious ways. This discomfort and unawareness is where theatre becomes helpful. Difficult and unmindful topics become easier and available to handle when we can do so in the context of fictional characters. In listening to the audiences during the discussions, I was reminded that the project's participants were open and ready to discuss the matters raised by the project. Conversely, even with the permission of theatre and an open environment, a few audience members kept their comments to traditionally supportive sentiments or withheld their most honest thoughts all together. Still an amazing experience for me in faith-based theatre is how God moves in the midst of casting. Of the four participants who joined the project just for the Presentation Phase, two expressed to me how their characters' issues mirrored



their own. I'd never met these cast members before the first rehearsal and I was totally unaware of their individual stories at the time of casting. Overall, the use of theatre as a ministry tool remains highly beneficial for all involved as we add texture to the ways we experience God individually and collectively.

Despite the challenging task of coordinating the calendars of the peer supervisory group, with creative adjustments this project and I were still able to benefit from their diverse perspectives and insights. Perhaps the closest realization to my vision occurred the evening of our final gathering where members of the cast and peer group joined me and my supervisor for a celebratory meal. Old college classmates and professional colleagues reunited and new friendships continued to form. These are the kinds of moments that reflect authentic ministry. Imaginably this is what the group meant as it answered the project's question, "The Christian Church is vital and relevant because of the promise that it holds."

[Top 3 Themes]

- 1) Family
- 2) Food
- 3) Socializing

Completely I appreciate the consistent and solid support from Olu Brown, my supervisor. Olu actively listened to my thoughts and concerns, the inspiration for this project and what I hoped it would contribute to ministry. He raised challenging questions and simply remained present from the beginning until its end. Available to me were Impact's resources – staff, members, space, marketing, volunteers – to help make this project worthy of everyone's time and effort. While not planned in conjunction with my practicum, Impact's sermon series and small group studies, especially the one on spirituality and sexuality, contributed to the knowledge and questions participants brought to our conversations, script, and presentations. With this background I was not the only source of generating meaningful discussion; I found this contribution from Olu and Impact very helpful to my project's process. I am also grateful to Columbia's support, providing space for



the bulk of our gatherings, our first presentation, and light refreshments for the first presentation.

From my learning covenant I successfully used small group conversations as a beneficial ministry tool to effectively express people's faith journey via a theatrical presentation and realized from these expressions the extent the Christian Church is having an impact in the lives of people drawn to urban ministry. My progress toward most of these goals moved rather seamlessly, aided by my supervisor's consultation as we crafted the activities and plans for supervision associated with them. I created safe places where participants shared their personal, and sometimes intimate, stories of the role the Church has played throughout their lives. They shared honestly where the Church's impact has been substantive and where it has been lacking. From these conversations we developed a script that seemed to resonate as authentic with the audiences who attended the readings. Unfortunately my attempts to reach audiences beyond my comfort zone (*generally conservative, traditional ministries*) did not prove fruitful. Despite having referrals from mutual contacts, these groups were not interested in participating in what I suppose is deemed progressive approaches to ministry. These results reminded me that despite our broad ecumenical, even interfaith, activities, at the grass roots level, churches remain rather exclusive to their own circles. Interestingly, these beyond-comfort-zone churches are all in suburban areas. I wonder if progressive ministry tends to resonate more with people in urban areas as their lifestyles may have greater proximity to the marginalized and oppressed of our society; thus, creating greater senses of urgency to seek vital and relevant ministry to the good, bad, and ugly challenges of everyday life. This is a key theory (*learning*) that we didn't include specifically in the covenant.

My third learning goal of proposing ways the Church should continue or adopt in order to maximize its impact in the lives of people drawn to urban ministry is actually simple and singular – follow models of progressive urban faith-based teams like that of Impact. Impact's success is phenomenal – two worship services within one year of launch, live streaming with consistent viewership from no less than five countries weekly, growing beyond facility's capacity within four years of launch, and small group study groups consistently full with over 20 offerings twice/year. Impact has realized that models of church that are decades old are weak and irrelevant. They are more concerned with authentic ministry than archaic tradition and people have tangibly responded. As mainline denominations continue to struggle with revitalization of declining membership numbers, I hope they soon realize that the struggle is within their clutch of not letting go that which has long since passed us by. To view excerpts from the first presentation and discussion: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mtfv07u0Ae8>.

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As I have not been engaged in active church ministry in several years, comments by the project's participants and my supervisor have reminded me that one of my strengths is gathering groups of seemingly disparate individuals to coalesce around a common interest and creating safe/sacred spaces for them to share and grow. While there may be several contexts in which these phenomena can occur, none quite facilitate its manifestation like theater can. I'm also reminded of the power of invitations to individuals to participate in something – whether it was me or a participant calling on someone else they knew to join us. This process may seem slow and tedious when we are building ministries or movements, but it is the most solid and lasting method of spreading the Gospel that I have ever encountered. An area in which I can continue to grow, prompted by this project, is that of facilitating focus groups. While my literature review included helpful material and I received guidance from my Columbia advisor, Dr. Pamela Cooper-White, and the clinical members of my peer supervisory group, nothing compares to the experience gained from the actual facilitation. My progression in the distinction between facilitating focus groups and bible/small group study certainly aided in effective facilitation of the discussions after the presentations.

"I found surprising learning about people's different experiences." ~Project Participant

Understanding of Ministry:

Approaching this practicum, I understood ministry to be most effective when it serves the needs of the people “on the ground.” This is actually a concept I learned early in my retail career. Successful merchants keep their “ears to the ground” to best respond to the consumer’s needs for basics, fashion, and affordability. While more churches in recent decades have finally applied business models to their organizational structures, only a relative few embrace and apply marketing concepts to their messaging

(product) and ministries (services). Perhaps this stems from the Church’s guard against corruption, which is a genuine concern. However, in contemporary times society is much more consumer savvy and the Church’s guard tends to reflect a sense of being out of touch with the very people it declares it wants to reach. Believing in its authority/enlightenment as dedicated/educated ministers and resistance to the Church blending in to popular culture and general society are probably other factors that contribute to the Church’s struggle to listening truly to people’s needs and responding more relevantly in tangible ways. The Church is no longer the center of society and hasn’t been for quite some time. For it to become more vital and relevant, it will have to release its stubborn insistence that it remains the center of society only because it believes it ought to be. The Church needs to humble itself and place its ear to the ground to hear at a grass roots level what God’s people need and then busy its self to tangibly, authentically, vitally, and relevantly serve the people.

[*from a project participant*]

“I was surprised by the evolution of the discussions. I thought we would stay focused on more spiritual concepts. Instead we focused on real, tangible issues.”

To date the following courses have supported this understanding: Introductory Seminar, American Spiritualities, Song of Songs, and Project Proposal Workshop. My other course, New Testament Spirituality, served neither to support nor challenge my understanding. To a certain extent the courses that supported my understanding also challenged it. As the course topics, class discussions and our readings inspired my thoughts, as I shared them, some classmates challenged them, viewing them as straying away from the traditional views of faith and ministry that too many of us hold too dear.

This practicum fully supports my understanding of ministry, even in the occasional ambivalent statements expressed by a few participants and audience members. I have clearly seen the benefits of raising social questions and issues in forthright, contemporary language toward arriving at theological understandings that contribute to people leading faithful lives every day, not just for an hour or two on Sunday mornings. For me, the ambivalence arises from the traditional teachings and approaches to faith that we all inherit from prior generations. One audience member contributed another source of ambivalence, or resistance to progressive faith approaches. She commented that while people may benefit from forward thinking and activities, if their world is otherwise chaotic, they will hold on to even an outdated faith approach because that is the one thing that keeps them living another day, standing on its stable, solid presence in their lives. Again, then, the benefits of creative tools like theatre become apparent as non-threatening, less confrontational approaches to vital and relevant ministry, especially to people drawn to churches in urban contexts.



These project results contributed significantly to inspiring the topic for my final project. The earnest cry from the participants reached my ears, the cry to receive contemporary, real-life, ground-level guidance/instruction from the houses of faith they continue to revere. Initially I thought I would seek the erasure of the artificial line we Christians have drawn between the sacred and secular aspects of our lives. However,

upon more reflection, I realized that this division is not at the heart of the participants' cry. They said that they needed assistance in managing their romantic relationships. So I changed the focus of my final project to research alternative approaches to traditional teachings regarding sexual freedom in tandem with God-faithfulness for single, heterosexual African American Protestant women. These results have further strengthened my approach to ministry which I will bring with increased confidence to my assignments and discussions in my remaining D.Min. courses. Similar implications exist for my future professional growth as I will continue to seek the fulfillment of my call to "work for the betterment of God's people" by keeping my ear to the ground to hear the rumblings of their souls and then to create sacred/safe places and creative tools to elicit those rumblings so the world can hear them and we all can be transformed.

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"I was surprised at the personal insights exploring these themes has provided." ~Project Participant