

**Love the Lord with your Mind or “Head” in Mutual Theological Reflection:**  
REFLECT Process Developed by John McNally for Acadia’s Mentored Ministry Peer Groups

“Theological field education provides places to practice ministry and spaces to reflect theologically on that experience to the end that the student experiences growth toward ministerial competency that has theological integrity.”<sup>1</sup> I adapted materials from several sources noted in each step to develop a practical tool to shape the space for reflecting theologically on ministry experiences. The regular font gives rationale for the process. *The lines in italics in each section give directions for the course assignment for writing up the process.* I picture how we REFLECT as a cyclical process of related steps, that gives practical form to the metaphors in James 1:19-25 of beginning with listening, looking intently in the mirror in light of God’s word, and doing something about it with the freedom of following Christ more fully. Guided by the Spirit, this relational process includes students reflecting with pastoral mentors and peer mentors in groups, with sharing written drafts or point form notes facilitating deeper discussion.

Theological reflection is a dynamic relationship that is both an art and a science. Your mentor’s role is to make sure this conversation takes places. He or she cannot force you to reflect and to make changes. Rather, your mentor creates the environment where change becomes desirable and where the Holy Spirit can work (John 14:16-17; John 16:13-14). Ultimately, the presence of the Holy Spirit is what enables you to move beyond cognitive recognition of the need for change to actual obedience. Your mentor seeks to assist you in seeing God at work in the normality of daily life...Some schools also use peer-led reflection in small groups on campus as a platform for this discussion.<sup>2</sup>

**Process to REFLECT Together**



**1. Recollections: What were the significant details in this stretching situation?**

Step 1: DESCRIBE THE EVENT...Look for those situations where you were called on to stretch or to develop new learnings or where you struggled or experienced pain...With this situation in mind, play the role of a good investigative reporter in describing the scene in as much detail as possible. Give a detailed, factual, specific, and concrete description of what took place...<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Barbara Blodgett and Matthew Floding, ed., *Brimming with God: Reflecting Theologically on Cases in Ministry*. (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2015), 1. These editors present various ministry cases with two seasoned theological field educators reflecting on a case from different perspectives or approaches to theological reflection.

<sup>2</sup> George Hillman, Jr., *Ministry Greenhouse: Cultivating Environments for Practical Learning*. (Herndon: Alban Institute, 2008), 104-105. Making connections to the passage in James 1 builds on Hillman’s insights, p. 117.

<sup>3</sup> Hillman, 106-107. Drawing insights from this author and others, I created an acronym to summarize steps of theological reflection.

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“I recall all you have done, O LORD; I remember your wonderful deeds of long ago. They are constantly in my thoughts. I cannot stop thinking about your mighty works.” (Psalm 77:11-12, NLT) As these verses illustrate, our recollections can be on very wonderful things and not just stressful dynamics. God helps us remember his wondrous actions and gracious character (Psalm 11:4) and the Spirit reminds us of the words and ways of Jesus (John 14:26), even in painful places, so we can ask God to show us key details.

Thomas Ashbrook highlights how Teresa of Avila emphasizes recollection on the journey to maturity.

We experience specific “lights” or insights and realizations, both in times of silence and among the activities of work, family, and so on. God increases our subtle awareness of His presence in every aspect of life, deepening our experience of His love and delight for us. Teresa describes this new awareness by using the analogy of God as the Good Shepherd whose whistle was once unheard but is now quietly discerned, causing us to direct our focus on the Shepherd. She calls this attentiveness to God “recollection.”<sup>4</sup>

From this perspective, recollection involves perception and description of details for discernment, information that we notice and note for understanding more deeply and responding more wisely.

*For the paper, the first-term case is already described in a chapter from Brimming with God (MM1) or selected with the process outlined in MM2, so just note in a sentence the chapter number and title. In the second-term, you choose a challenging circumstance from your ministry context and in up to a page describe what happened in this situation. In both terms, it is recommended but not required to write about a case discussed in peer groups as your thinking is broadened and deepened with the input of others.*

**2. Emotions: What feelings were evident in others and stirring in you?**

Step 2: IDENTIFY YOUR EMOTIONS...A mark of an emotionally healthy individual is emotional self-awareness. Emotional self-awareness is the ability to both recognize a feeling as it is happening and to be able to name that feeling...Taking the time to name your emotions in a situation helps sort out what is going on internally as you reflect on a specific event...<sup>5</sup>

In various Psalms, God is interested in the heart-level responses and emotional quality associated with our thoughts. “Give me relief from my distress...In your anger, do not sin; when you are on your beds, search your hearts and be silent... You have filled my heart with greater joy...I will lie down and sleep in peace...” (Psalm 4:1-2, 7-8) “Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts” (Psalm 139:23). In Proverbs, understanding emotion is part of growing in wisdom: “Hope deferred makes the heart sick, but when dreams come true, there is life and joy.” (13:12, NLT) Proverbs describes dynamics of cheerfulness and heartache (15:13, 30), anger ensnaring others (22:24-25), a pure heart and gracious speech (22:11), risks of zeal without knowledge (19:2), problems with singing cheerful songs to people with a heavy heart (25:20), and many more emotional dynamics. The fruit of the Spirit are virtues and emotional qualities that bring life-giving freedom, in contrast to unhealthy, destructive dynamics in our sinful nature. (Galatians 5:13-26).

*For the paper, in a paragraph notice and note **the range of specific emotions evident in the various people involved in the case and arising in you as you reflect on it.** Some cases have stronger emotional undercurrents and may require more space to cover this area. For possible feelings and needs under the surface of the details, see the resources on feelings on Acorn and in Transforming Church Conflict.<sup>6</sup>*

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<sup>4</sup> R. Thomas Ashbrook, *Mansions of the Heart: Exploring the Seven Stages of Spiritual Growth*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, second ed., 2019), 117.

<sup>5</sup> Hillman, 108.

<sup>6</sup> Deborah Van Deusen Hunsinger and Theresa Latini. *Transforming Church Conflict: Compassionate Leadership in Action*. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2013). See especially chapter 3 and Appedices 1 and 2.

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**3. Foundations: What biblical, theological, historical, and cultural principles relate to this situation?**

Step 3: LISTEN TO THE RESOURCES... When faced with a decision or when trying to reconcile your actions, the first place to look is a scriptural foundation... In theological reflection, you put your own experiences, both personal and cultural, into a “genuine conversation” with the norm of religious heritage from the biblical message and Christian tradition.<sup>7</sup>

In Ephesians 2:20, Paul writes about how Christian convictions and communities being “...built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone” (see also 1 Corinthians 3:10-16, 2 Timothy 3:10-17). Theological reflection reveals foundations for Christian action.

*For the paper, these foundations are major parts of your paper. For example, you could cover biblical and theological reflections in a page each and historical and cultural principles in a paragraph each. Materials may vary in each area for each case, but use most of your space for biblical and theological reflection and add selective historical and cultural reflections. See Hillman’s description for more details.*

**4. Listen in Prayer: What might the Lord be revealing about your response as you pray about it?**

Paul prays for enlightened hearts and deeper knowledge, empowered by God’s Spirit, rooted in Christ’s love, and overflowing in Gospel ministry (Ephesians 1:15-23, 3:14-21, 6:18-20). In Selah spiritual direction, I’ve learned the value of such prayerful listening and prayer pauses to clarify such connections. In considering David’s experience expressed through prayer in Psalm 7, Ben Patterson writes,

He reflected on his desperate situation theologically, and he wrote lyrics to be prayed. There is a wonderful lesson here to be learned about prayer. The things we fear can have terrible effects on us, not least of which is what we become when we are afraid. Fear can stampede our emotions and actions, and we can start to look like the enemy, matching threat for threat and curse for curse. How much better to stop and remember what we know to be true about God and sin and guilt, and to turn that into a prayer. The very act of writing down our fears in light of the truth, of wrestling with syntax and metaphor in order to pray them, can be godly discipline in being, “quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to get angry. [For] human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires” (James 1:19-20). Perhaps you were taught that written prayers are inauthentic and contrived. If so, consider this: All the Psalms are written prayers! It may be that the most authentic prayers are the written ones, for they are the fruit of a heart that has struggled to think God’s thoughts after him. The great prayers of Scripture come from people who so internalized God’s words and thoughts that they came out of their mouths and through their pens as their own. They had wrestled with God and had come away changed and enlightened.<sup>8</sup>

*For the paper, in a short paragraph of a few sentences notice and note what comes up as you prayerfully listen for the Lord’s perspective about this case and how to approach it wisely. These lines may be in the form of a written prayer or a summary of themes that came up as you prayed about the situation.*

**5. Encourage:<sup>9</sup> How can we celebrate values and victories as we recognize together what went well?**

Scripture says, “encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing... encourage one another daily...let us encourage one another” (1 Thessalonians 5:11; Hebrews 3:13, 10:25).

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<sup>7</sup> Hillman, 110, 113. Hillman’s writing gives questions to broaden such a “conversation.”

<sup>8</sup> Ben Patterson, *God’s Prayer Book: The Power and Pleasure of Praying the Psalms*. (Carol Stream: Tyndale, 2008), 52.

<sup>9</sup> Steps 5 through 7 integrate insights from research on five exemplary leadership practices and relate to the last three of these practices: “model the way, inspire a shared vision, challenge the process, enable others to act, encourage the heart”. James Kouzes and Barry Posner, eds., *Christian Reflections of The Leadership Challenge*. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004), 38. The REFLECT process links theological reflection with empowering leadership.

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*For the paper, in a short paragraph of a few sentences notice and note the areas of affirmation and encouragement that you would share with various people involved, including the pastoral student that will be you in the second term “cases.”*

**6. Challenge: How can we seek innovative ways to change, grow, and improve?**

The instructions in Hebrews 10:25 about offering supportive encouragement are combined with words about challenging one another: “And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds” (Hebrews 10:24). Proverbs pictures this process too: “As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another” (27:17).

*For the paper, in a short paragraph of a few sentences notice and note the areas for tentatively sharing with the student invitations to change, grow or improve. **These invitations are primarily framed as evocative questions like you have been working on for in your introductory SELAH group spiritual direction** or, if questions are not emerging, as a tentative suggestion for consideration. Remember that you are working on the skill of giving focused feedback in a constructive rather than critical tone.*

**7. Tailor in a Team: How can we collaborate through cooperative action adapted to this unique place?**

“Step 4: APPLICATION...Unless you move past the intellectual exercise of theological reflection to action, then all of the previous steps are really done in vain...What is your next step?”<sup>10</sup> Proverbs advises us to carefully consider our steps (14:15) and seek God’s guidance for our paths (3:5-6) as we draw wisdom from others (11:14, 15:22) and partner with God’s purpose that prevails (19:20-21). In *Christian Reflections of The Leadership Challenge* and related resources, Kouzes and Posner describe this as “enable others to act,” which involves contextualizing in collaboration or tailoring in a team process.

*For the paper, in a short paragraph of a few sentences notice and note what are some potential next steps in action or implementation to deepen, strengthen, or broaden ministry in this unique setting. Remember that you are working on both proposing a path forward and collaboratively contextualizing those steps for this unique place, so please clarify the potential role of others in the implementation process. Beyond the paper, this REFLECT process can lead into the GROW process of implementing goals.*

*Since the overall focus of this paper is on depth of insight rather than length of content, take approximately 2 to 3 pages to cover the foundations (#3) and 1 to 2 pages total to cover the other areas (#1-2, 4-7). Depending on the clarity of your writing and the complexity of the case being considered, your initial recollections can range between a few paragraphs to a full page. Remember that in the first term of MMI, you simply need to note the case from the book. Please write in complete sentences and use Turabian style footnotes for all sources (no bibliography needed). I am not looking for perfection, but for progress in your thinking in these areas. The intention is integration with a mix of breadth and depth of thought in strategic selection of a few representative ideas about the issues rather than a comprehensive coverage of every angle of analysis. With integration in mind and the cycle of engagement diagram on the Mentored Ministry home page in view (<https://acadiadiv.ca/mentored-ministry/>), remember that you are encouraged to draw insights from other courses to inform your interaction with the issues involved in ministry praxis.*

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<sup>10</sup> Hillman, 117.