

## SECTION 1

### HOLY GROUND: PLACE, PRESENCE, AND FORMATION FOR MINISTRY

#### *Editor's Introduction*

Issue 46 explores the complex and rich connections between formation for ministry, reflective practice, and experiences of place. If human beings are meaning-making creatures, and if meaning-making is central to the work of religious leadership, then attention to place is a vital dimension of both religious leadership and reflective practice.

Practical theologian Jennifer Ayres offers a helpful definition of place: "A location becomes a *place* when it is imbued with meaning, with histories, and contestations. Indeed, a shorthand for what is meant by 'place' is 'space plus character,' attending to the relationship between geographical location and the human soul."<sup>1</sup> Moreover, as in any category of human meaning, place is shot through with dynamics of power. Thus, theorist Tim Creswell defines place as "space invested with meaning in the context of power."<sup>2</sup>

Places are not found; they are made. Places are not given; they are constructed. Indeed, theorists have long argued that place is a product of human meaning-making rather than a stable, objective spatial or geographical reality.

Places—regions, nations, cities, neighborhoods, ecosystems—are constructed and contested realities. The geographical boundaries that give shape to particular places; the histories of human settlement, cultural production, multiple modalities of power, demographic change, etc., that give places their distinctive character; and the structural realities of places (economic, political, cultural, etc.), especially structural forms of violence, evil, and injustice, all determine how human communities experience place as complex products of human agency.

Contemporary experiences of place are changing dramatically. Digital spaces are opening up new opportunities and challenges for how human beings encounter one another in virtual communities. Climate change creates the conditions for the routine disruption and devastation of familiar places, alienating communities from experiences of home. Nationalistic ideologies compete with cosmopolitan worldviews to determine whose places matter—which places are centered and which are marginalized—often elevating imagined places, places that never existed, as norms of the meaning and value of place. Global war and violence displace communities from their home places, forcing migration and the negotiation of belonging in places not chosen, among communities not

one's own, under political and economic conditions that render the possibility of home uncertain and the right to place itself a matter of contest.

Amid profound changes in religiosity and religious participation, communities of faith are exploring new forms of gathering, often reimagining the place of their ministry and witness. Seminaries and schools of theology are revisiting similar questions: Where is theologically trained leadership needed, and what are the vital and distinctive contributions such leadership makes in places that aren't traditional congregations or hospitals?

The many excellent contributions to this section explore how formation for religious leadership happens in place, how religious leaders shape the meaning and experience of place and hold space for the Holy, and what that means for the work of formation and supervision in ministry.

Several pieces imagine place not simply as a setting but as an agent, an active participant, in the process of formation for religious leadership. Gianni Francisco-Passarella notes that in hospital contexts, sacred spaces rarely emerge where one might expect—in hospital chapels. Rather, sacred encounters occur more often in hospital hallways and floor kitchens. Ministry therefore happens in and through specific environments, and those places shape what chaplaincy is and means. For Antwon C. Lewis, context is curriculum; the task of ministry is not to bring holiness into a space but to recognize that it is already there.

Christina R. Zaker examines how specific places (Catholic Theological Union in Chicago, Peru) shaped Pope Leo XIV through proximity, reflective practice, and what she calls *orthokardia* (a "right heart"). Writing as a participant-observer and seminary formation educator, Nathan H. Scherrer argues that sacred circles, practiced across pagan, Celtic, and interfaith communities, function as pedagogical technologies that train attention, redistribute authority, and cultivate moral imagination. Bonnie Lemelle Abadie's poem "The Land Has Memory" traces the relationship between land, identity, and formation across three generations of a French Creole family in Louisiana and Texas, moving through three registers: ancestral memory, contested racial identity, and theological belonging. Finally, drawing on her work with Luther Seminary's retreats for Evangelical Lutheran Church in America student interns and supervisors at St. John's Abbey Guesthouse in Collegeville, Minnesota, Emily Rova-Hegener explores the transformative power of retreat spaces along the axes of mind, body, and spirit.

Drawing on their ministry in U.S. national parks, Dave Degler and Samantha Mittmann argue that, as in a good story, place functions as a "main character" in a student's field education experience, giving shape to the practical wisdom and vocational formation that emerges through those experiences. Field education students should therefore evaluate the place of their ministry the way a literary critic evaluates a setting, not as background but as a main character in their experience. Lisl Heymans Paul describes the design of a multi-layered ministry context analysis exercise that encourages

students to develop a “hermeneutic of accompaniment” through deep listening to people and place. Daniel Pryfogle, through his work on sacred-civic placemaking, understands that a congregation’s disused buildings and grounds are not problems to be solved but vocational resources to be discerned and reimagined in response to the work of the Holy in communities facing affordable housing shortages.

As an agent in the process of vocational formation, place does not require dedicated or conventional religious infrastructure. Katrina Bentsen travels to ancient temples, Byzantine churches, and Ottoman mosques to conclude that holiness resides less in buildings than in community, nature, and divine presence. Through her poetic reflection on waiting in the season of Advent, Jill Y. Crainshaw explores the ways in which places of Advent waiting are not places of stasis; rather, they are “living geographies,” places “where God’s justice is already taking root.”

Taken together, these contributions invite readers into a practice of attending to place as a theological and formational act, calling religious leaders, supervisors, and educators to greater accountability for the places they inhabit, the places they form others to serve, and the places that reflective practice has yet to explore.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Jennifer R. Ayres, *Inhabitanace: Ecological Religious Education* (Baylor University Press, 2019), 88, emphasis in the original.

<sup>2</sup> Tim Cresswell, *Place: An Introduction*, 2nd ed. (John Wiley & Sons, 2015), 19.