

Candidacy Pathway:
Supervised Ministry Education

Theological Reflection Resource

2024



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vocation

The United Church of Canada
L'Église Unie du Canada

Candidacy Pathway: Supervised Ministry Education, Theological Reflection Resource (2024)



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About This Resource

This resource augments the *Candidacy Pathway: Supervised Ministry Education—Educational Supervisor's Orientation* handbook.

Additional resources for Educational Supervisors, Community of Faith Connection members, and candidates are available from the Vocational Minister or on the [Candidacy Pathway](#) page of united-church.ca.

What Is Theological Reflection?

The purpose of theological reflection is to discern how God is present and active in our lives. We are theologically reflecting when we ask, “Where is God in this?” and “How is God active in this?”

When we reflect theologically on events and experiences in our lives, we are not seeking to fix the situation or to solve a problem. The goal is to understand the Divine more deeply.

Theological reflection asks us to consider what the sources of our faith (Bible, theology, traditions, etc.) say about our experiences. It invites us to consider what our experiences are teaching us about God, ourselves, our theology, our assumptions, and our ministry with others.

Theological reflection affirms the statement from the United Church’s New Creed: “We believe in God: who has created and is creating.” Reflecting theologically on the events of our lives today invites us to consider how God continues to be a creative force in the world in our everyday experiences. Theological reflection is a conversation that “opens the gates between our experience and our Christian heritage” (Patricia O’Connell Killen and John DeBeer, *The Art of Reflection*). It is “an opportunity to...discover what we believe and how our faith and life intersect” (Abigail Johnson, *Reflecting with God: Connecting Faith and Daily Life in Small Groups*).

Resources for Theological Reflection

Blodgett, Barbara J., and Matthew Floding, eds., *Brimming with God: Reflecting Theologically on Cases in Ministry* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2015).

Johnson, Abigail, *Reflecting with God: Connecting Faith and Daily Life in Small Groups* (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2004).

Killen, Patricia O’Connell, and John de Beer, *The Art of Theological Reflection* (Chestnut Ridge, NY: Crossroad Classic, 1994).

Models for Theological Reflection

A Model for Theological Reflection on Experience¹

by the Rev. Dr. Abigail Johnson

Name the Experience

Briefly describe the ministry in which you are engaged. Think of several experiences/events/situations in your current situation in which you have played a significant role. Select *one*, preferably one with which you were challenged or about which you have some questions or concerns.

Reflect on the Experience

- What happened?
- Who was involved?
- What was my role?
- What were my reactions?
- How did others respond?
- Where did it leave me?

Analyze the Experience

- What factors were at work in the situation? (attitudes, emotions, assumptions, social and cultural issues, power dynamics, etc.)
- What was at stake for me? (How does it connect with my own history, family and/or life experience, convictions, values, etc.)
- How was I enriched or challenged by it?
- What did I discover about myself?
- What do I want to remember or forget about it?
- What questions or concerns remain with me?

Make Some Faith Connections

- What theological images/symbols/concepts does it evoke?
- Who is God in this situation, for me and for others?
- What biblical, historical, literary, or other stories does it call to mind?
- What learning from United Church tradition is applicable?
- How does it relate to other faiths/cultures/traditions?

Reflect on Your Learning

- How has my faith been enriched or challenged by it?
- What have I learned or discovered about the practice of ministry?

¹ Abigail Johnson, *Reflecting with God: Connecting Faith and Daily Life in Small Groups* (Lanham, MD: Rowan and Littlefield), 2004.

- What have I learned or discovered about my own pastoral identity?
- How does all of this relate to my learning goals?

Pray

As you conclude your reflection on this situation, take time to pray, giving thanks for the learning arising from this situation, letting go of hurts and concerns, and greeting new opportunities for pastoral depth and sensitivity.

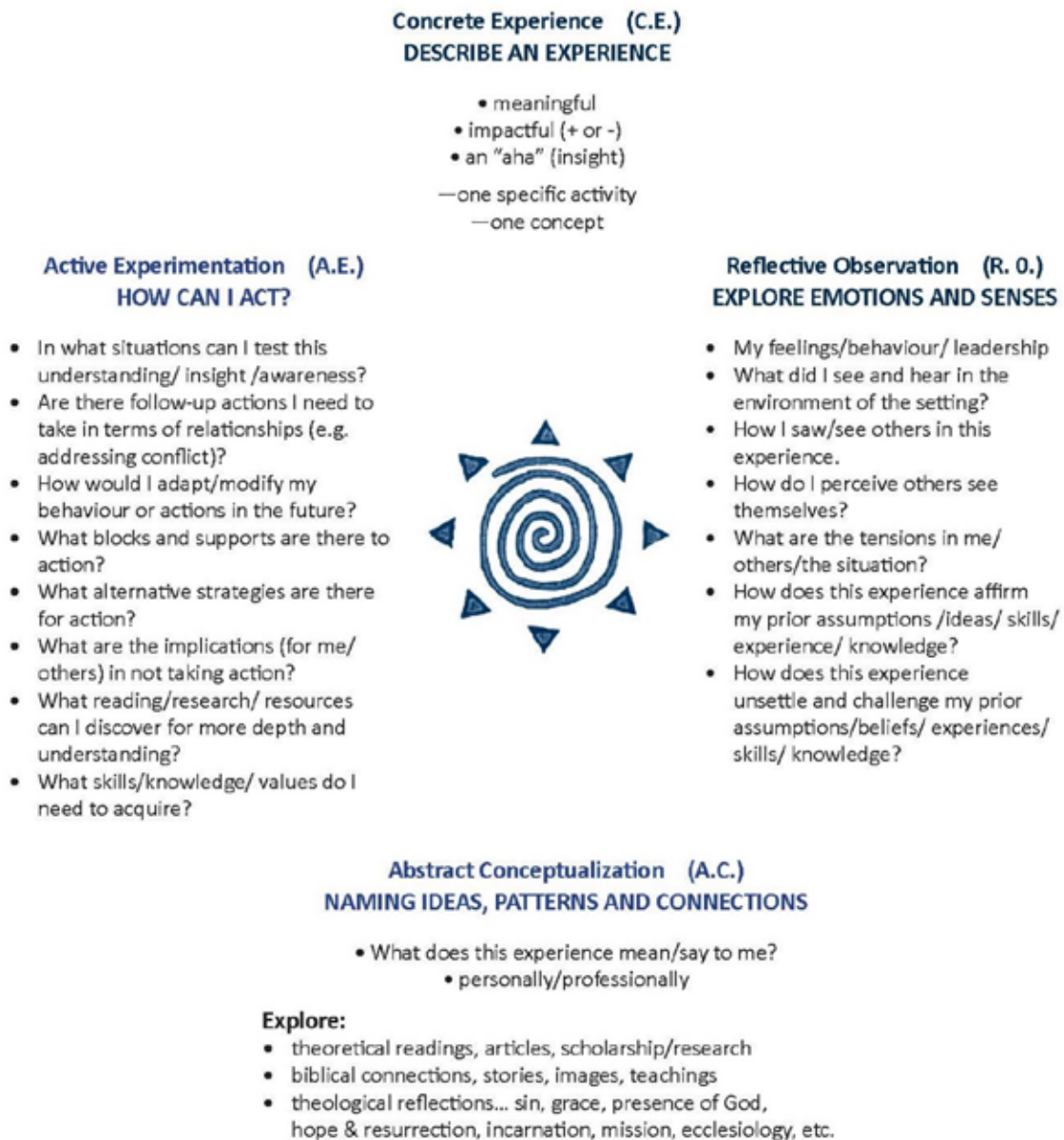
Conclusion and Discussion

Using this experience and your reflections on it, suggest some open-ended themes or questions that might open up a broader discussion of the theology and practice of ministry.

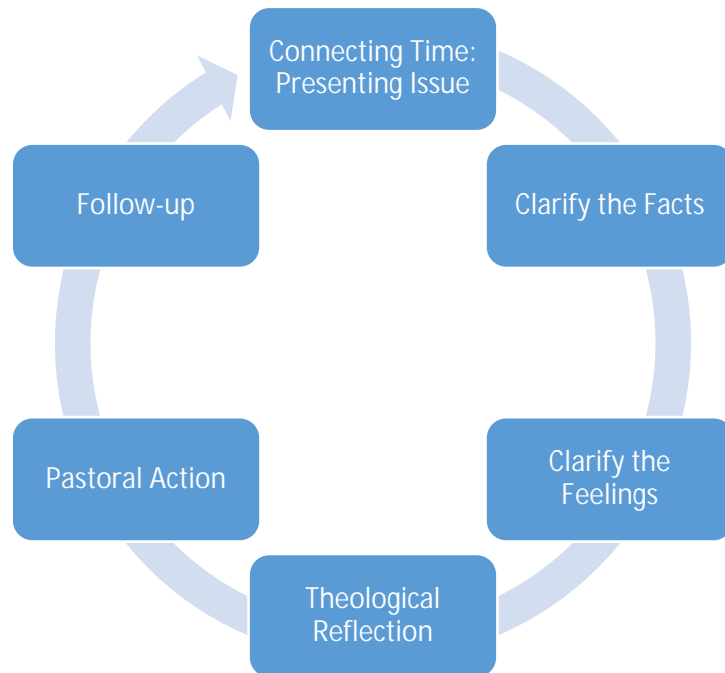
Spiral Model of Theological Reflection: Action/Reflection Learning Model in Theological Education

(Used with permission from the Centre for Christian Studies)

In the Spiral Model you start by thinking about a **concrete experience** you have had. You then explore the **emotions and senses** associated with that experience. Following this you think about the **patterns, ideas, and connections** arising from this experience. Finally, you determine a course of **action** (leading to new experiences to be reflected upon).



Educational Supervision Model: Theological Reflection “Loop”



Connecting Time: Presenting Issue

- Why is it an issue?

Clarify the Facts

- Who, what, when, where, how?
- What are you still questioning about the situation?
- Be clear what “the issue” is.

Clarify the Feelings

- What emotions are you aware of?
- How do they make you feel (positive/negative)?
- What do you fear?

Theological Reflection

- So what? analysis
- Meaning in the event: Where do you see the Holy? hope? What are positive/negative points?
- Does this remind you of a story from the Bible/from your culture?
- Where is God in this situation?

Pastoral Action

- What next?
- What’s in the way?

- What are the alternatives?

Follow-up

- Plan for next session.
- Review Learning Covenant.
- How does the issue fit into the Learning Covenant?

Wesley Quadrilateral

(Source: "Confessing Our Faith," a project of The United Church of Canada, circa 1983)

Theological reflection begins by identifying the issue to be considered. It could be setting the budget, planning an anniversary, preparing a sermon, or even confronting a dispute.

Now choose one of the areas of the quadrilateral: scripture, experience, tradition, and reason. You can begin with any one of the four quadrants. Write down ideas and questions as you look at the issue from each of the four perspectives. What does experience teach you? What does scripture have to say to this issue? Are there traditions surrounding this topic? Are we reasoning clearly?

<p style="text-align: center;">SCRIPTURE</p> <p>In matters of faith and practice scripture is essential for theological reflection. Its authority becomes apparent when we appreciate the richness of the many kinds of writing in the Bible and learn their original source and purpose.</p> <p>Scripture is relevant to our life experience. It also tests the past—such as the tradition of the church and the changing ideas of right and wrong.</p> <p>It reminds us that we are the people of the living word. Writings that grew out of experiences of faith are now treasured by the community of faith.</p> <p>Turning to scripture to discern God’s will is a stimulating spiritual exploration well known to many and new to others.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">EXPERIENCE</p> <p>Experience is the soil out of which life grows and takes on meaning. The story of faith is the story of reflection and experience.</p> <p>Think of experience as putting things together, making sense of them, seeing patterns and purposes emerge. For people of faith this includes experience of the presence of God. It involves our sense of ourselves as made in the image of God and as inhabitants in a world God loves.</p> <p>Christian experience is varied and while all may be valid, none can claim to be absolutely right, overriding the experience of other faithful people. The experience of love is both our safeguard and our liberation.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">TRADITION</p> <p>We are shaped by the past in ways that are subtle but powerful. We have received the faith from others. It has been expressed in acts of worship, in music, in convictions about personal conduct, and in responsibilities toward our neighbours.</p> <p>Some of our tradition is set out in confessions of faith, in credos, which are efforts to say publicly what we believe. Often these come in times of crisis, or from wilderness experiences.</p> <p>We have oral traditions also, as did those very young churches in the first Christian centuries.</p> <p>A living church has a lively memory, linked to a world of faith, which is discovered in and through tradition.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">REASON</p> <p>Reason is God’s gift to the church as well as to the individual. Reason (or intellect) brings order to our theological thinking and therefore to our decisions and ultimately to our actions. We become more consistent, constant, dependable, and steadfast.</p> <p>Reason is necessary when dealing with new situations. It is the “common” sense that makes the obscure clear.</p> <p>Reason helps to guard against misguided interpretation of scripture, or faulty interpretation of experience. It respects innermost thought and individual insights, while recognizing the interdependence of the whole of creation.</p>

You will likely discover as you work (individually or together) that once you have put down the obvious points in each quadrant, new insights emerge. Sometimes completely new views of the issue come forward when you read over the four quadrants. You will find that scripture pushes against scripture, and that people's experiences differ radically.

As the work continues, the insights from one quadrant flow into the others, and the lines begin to disappear. Something else happens. We discover that we are led into larger fields of truth (John 16:13). When we talk about scripture, we contribute what we do know, and we search for further knowledge, understanding, and insights. When we apply reason, it takes everything we've got plus the contribution of our neighbours. The quadrilateral makes us aware of both what we know and what we need to know. It opens up areas of spiritual growth for us.

The use of the Wesley Quadrilateral moves us toward the awesome conviction that our life is set in the presence of God, a greatness beyond our understanding (Psalm 145). Theological reflection does not reduce the profound mysteries of God to formulas or slogans. Out of it may come clarity about pressing current issues. Out of it may come creeds, confessions, statements, hymns, liturgies—all of them attempt to express what we believe.

When undertaken as a spiritual exercise, theological reflection quickens our faith, sets our daily concerns in a larger context, and reminds us what we are called to be. It is a way of engaging in life.