



## Thriving in MINISTRY

*an initiative from Virginia Theological Seminary*

### **Novice to Expert Continuum for Clergy<sup>1</sup>**

The heart of clergy vocational development is integrating theoretical knowledge with practical experience. Academic study along with Clinical Pastoral Education and Supervised Field Education launches new clergy into their context with deep formation intellectually and initial formation in the practice (the art) of ministry. Fortunately, the nursing continuum of professional development sheds insight on clergy development. **Nurses, who similarly launch into clinical practice with deep theoretical knowledge and initial practice, mirror the ways clergy develop through the contextual experience that's gained through increasingly complex human decision making and fluidity with context.**

#### **Novice**

"Beginners have had no experience in the situation in which they are expected to perform." A novice enters the context of practice with rules and has yet to develop the skills needed to apply those rules. As a result, **'context-dependent' judgement** and skill is acquired through the experience of testing and challenging those rules.

- For clergy, they enter the parish or other ministry most frequently as ordained leaders with experience limited to the formal aspects of preaching, teaching, and pastoral care. New clergy often struggle to prioritize, because all ministerial activities seem to have an equal level of importance. This process is further complicated by experiencing the **dissonance between the theory and practice** of vocation.

#### **Advanced Beginner**

"[H]aving coped with enough real situations to note the recurring meaningful situational components," an advanced beginner pastor has lived as an ordained, public, spiritual leader for 6 to 18 months by preaching, teaching, conducting sacramental rites, supervising volunteers on at least one on-going ministry, and learning the history of the congregation (or institution) they serve. They are **finding their own voice, challenged by prioritizing time, constantly assessing vocation, family, rest, study and play balance as well as balancing the challenges of transition** with hope for the future.

#### **Competent**

"Competence, typified by the nurse who has been on the job in the same or similar situations two to three years, develops when the nurse **begins to see his or her actions in terms of long-range goals or plans of which he or she is consciously aware.**"

- Clergy ordained two to three years and serving in a consistent ministry setting are now conversant in the foundational history and lay leadership dynamics as well as the disappointments and delights of the congregation. Since the bigger picture of the parish is coming into view, she or he may begin to serve on diocesan committees or community organizations. The clergy person is ready to try new styles of preaching

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from Patricia Benner. 2001. *From Novice to Expert, Excellence and Power in Clinical Nursing Practice*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall Health, pp 20-36.



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and ready to engage in more complex levels of parish life as a priest-in-charge or rector. At this point, most clergy lack the flexibility to travel through multiple parish life crises without being overwhelmed.

### **Proficient**

“Characteristically, the **proficient performer perceives situations as wholes rather than in terms of aspect, and performance is guided by maxims...The perspective is *not* thought out but ‘presents itself’ based on experience and recent events.**”

- A proficient clergy person moves from recognizing dynamics to shaping relationships, the parish community, and her leadership style with the comprehensive ministerial context in mind. This is a time of significant leadership development because the role of the **clergy goes beyond self-defining and self-actualizing to self as an active definer** of the vision, values, and character of the congregation.
- The clergy person is ready to take risks and vocational life is in a balanced flow. She can stretch herself when long work hours are needed to engage a crisis and can then refuel by temporarily handing over the responsibility and stepping back. Her preaching, teaching, pastoral care, and administrative output is consistent even as the needs in these areas fluctuate. She can supervise employees and finances competently and may also begin to mentor new clergy. **These clergy are calm in describing challenges and creative in seeking solutions.** Theologically, hope embraces suffering.

### **Expert**

“The expert nurse, with an enormous background of experience, now has an intuitive grasp of each situation and zeros in on the accurate region of the problem without wasteful, consideration of a large range of unfruitful, alternative diagnoses and solutions. **Capturing the descriptions of expert performance is difficult, because the expert operates from a deep understanding of the total situation...**”

- While it is seldom possible for any clergy person, no matter how experienced, to grasp the total situation of shifting community life, an expert clergy person engages her congregation with flexibility and fluidity that enables her to consistently have a balcony-view of the congregation and an awareness of the daily dynamics of community life.
- Often these clergy are called to diocesan and/or national leadership positions. She may be recognized for a particular gift, e.g. preaching, spiritual writing, stewardship, administration, or innovation. She is conversant in connecting the biblical story with her personal story and the community’s story. **Vocation of self, family, church, prayer, is deeply integrated.** The clergy person communicates the “core and counter-testimony” of life in faith: profound joy and full awareness of the suffering, injustice, and biases human beings visit on one another. Theologically, hope transcends suffering.