

# OUT IN THE FIELD

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**A** Field Education student invites people who have struggled with drug addiction to give testimonies in order to inspire women battling their own demons. In the process, the student's family finds a measure of healing.

While learning how to be a listening presence at the end of life, students serving in hospice care wrestle with the recent deaths of their own loved ones.

A prison chaplaincy placement years ago fuels one graduate's ongoing work for justice and peacemaking.

In these ways and countless others, Master of Divinity students at Louisville Seminary brush up against the holy. They come face-to-face with situations that affect communities across the United States: drug addiction, death, mass incarceration. In the process, they learn to discern God's presence at the

intersection of their lives, their passions, their pain, and the lives of others.

These experiences all took place in what we in the Field Education office call "agency placements." While Louisville Seminary has long seen congregational placements as central formative experiences for ministry, we also have a deep history of sending students to unique ministries that operate outside of church walls. Just the other day, I thumbed through an issue of *Mosaic* from 1995 and read about a placement that enabled a former student to produce a television series on "Race Relations and the Religious Community" and "The Faith Community's Response to Drug Abuse and Family Violence." (I suppose this also demonstrates that the writer of Ecclesiastes had it right: There is nothing new under the sun - at least when it comes to the challenges facing faith communities today!)

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Several years ago, I was involved in a research study that culminated in a book co-edited by Kenda Creasy Dean and Christy Lang Hearlson, *How Youth Ministry Can Change Theological Education—If We Let It* (Eerdmans, 2016). In the book, the editors describe a perspective on Christian leadership that coalesces around the images of servants, witnesses and stewards. These images “suggest that the task of Christian Leadership has more to do with *discernment* than *influence*. Servants, witnesses and stewards help faith communities discern and undertake practices that enact their missional identities instead of prodding communities into predetermined shapes.

“Discipleship formation becomes less something that church leaders do *to* parishioners than a mutual process in which leaders and parishioners alike help each other conform to the image of God in Jesus Christ.” (*How Youth Ministry Can Change Theological Education*, p. 48)

This very skill of mutual discernment for mission is what yet another student learned while serving in an agency placement at the headquarters for her denomination. As she helped to create resources exploring immigration issues, plan worship for a polity conference, and consider the work of validated ministries, she realized that “the lifeblood of the Presbyterian church ... is in our congregations and our neighborhoods, our schools and our communities,” and that “ministry is not a solo endeavor; there is a reason Christ sent the disciples out in pairs. When we are following God, we need people in our corner.”

When I was involved in youth ministry years ago, I grew to appreciate the power of a simple question: Where was God in all of this? In joy and sorrow, in the extraordinary and the mundane, in thriving organizations and dying churches, God is at work—if we have eyes to see. This skill of discerning God sits at the center of all that we do in Field Education. What is true for agency placements is true for Field Education in general, for the academic discipline of Practical Theology more broadly, and for the life of those who follow Christ. So much of ministry involves looking for God together—in the pulpit and the pew, on the streets and in shelters, behind bars and beyond borders. ■