

In June 2000, I arrived at Columbia Theological Seminary to begin Greek school. With my sons, then 16 and 13, we made a leap of faith as we moved from South Alabama, settled into the Village and began our respective new schools. We thought we would be here for three years, and then relocate when I was called to a congregation somewhere. As graduation approached in the spring of 2003, I was interviewing with several congregations along the East Coast. We were preparing for more changes.

And yet, I was praying for a call that would allow me to stay in the area so my younger son could graduate from Decatur HS. When three people at CTS asked me to think about applying for new grant-funded position in the Office of Continuing Education, I took notice – the “Trinity” of discernment got my attention. The seminary’s S3 Project, part of the Lilly Endowment’s Sustaining Pastoral Excellence Program, included a position to coordinate the grant and other con ed programs. My previous career in program administration, community outreach, training and education, plus my new theological school degree, seemed to do the trick. I was hired. And the adventures in lifelong learning began.

In my previous work with Red Cross Blood Services, I had supported the technical training and professional development of clinical and administrative staff. I’d been engaged in practical education to develop skills that make a difference in the vocational workplace. Helping others access a variety of resources was part of my work. In the office of Continuing Education at CTS, I found a new place in which to use my previous experience AND my new theological degree.

From Dent Davis, the administrative staff person who first hired me, I learned about Eric Hoffer, an American writer and philosopher of the mid-20th Century. These words of Hoffer’s continue to resonate with me as they did when I first learned them: “In times of change, learners inherit the earth, while the learned find themselves beautifully equipped to deal with a world that no longer exists.” Leaders in congregations have always need to draw upon what they learned in seminary about preaching, pastoral care and Bible and theology as they served as pastors in congregations, as chaplains, church educators and other positions in the variety of organizations and institutions in which they served. But formation continues long after a degree is completed. Understanding a budget, navigating shifting cultural and economic sands, understanding how to work in human behavioral systems, supervising staff have always been part of the work of a faith leader. A seminary education – basic or advanced degree – cannot cover everything. Continuing education – lifelong education – is what keeps professionals in any field connected with their discipline.

One of the most significant changes in my work at the seminary – other than serving with new faculty and presidents - occurred a few years after I was hired. Three previously separate offices - the Lay Institute, The Spirituality Program and Continuing Education – merged under the umbrella of the Center for Lifelong Learning. We consolidated staff, cross-marketed courses, and started to mirror the shift in theological education that continues today.

The shift to online learning started well before the recent pandemic pivot sent us to Zoom and Moodle and beyond, but it didn’t get much traction in the CLL until the arrival of Dr. G, Israel Galindo, in 2013. Bringing with him a considerable expertise in course design and commitment to the practical aspects of online continuing education for clergy and church leaders, the CLL began to embrace the shift. We were well-positioned to tackle the challenges we faced in 2020. Our online courses now make up about 50% of our schedule. Whether they remain at that rate remains to be seen, the shifts in non-degree theological education continue. With shrinking numbers of worshippers and declining contributions, funds for professional development or even a basic degree are often scarce. Time is tight and the

challenges of a graduate student relocating self and family to do additional degree work are well-attested elsewhere. Currently serving clergy and church leaders have experienced excellent, affordable lifelong learning online/hybrid format courses and they won't give them up entirely, even as we anticipate a return to more in-person seminars and conference in the next couple of years.

With the Church continuing to undergo reformations, post-degree lifelong learning programs offered by seminaries and theological schools, denominational conference centers and offices, and the emerging number of independent providers of programs continue to reform as well. I've been involved with the Association of Leaders of Lifelong Learning for Ministry (ALLLM) since 2004, and there I met and learned from leaders across the country and Canada. My work in the S3 Project provided fertile ground for my commitment to peer-focused, dialogical practical theological education designed to sustain clergy and church leaders over a lifetime of ministry to take root. In 2006, I began the Doctor of Educational Ministry Degree at CTS, and in 2010 completed it and the Foundations of Christian Leadership Cohort through Leadership Education at Duke Divinity. Among these groups, I also found my peers. These relationships and the practical support that came with them sustained my development, as I transitioned to Director in 2009. Later in 2019, I completed the Coaching Institute and added another group of peers and skills. Throughout my career, I've tried to practice what I preached – to be a lifelong learner.

The work that we have done over the years to support clergy and church leaders during stages of ministry, particularly regarding peer-learning and praxis, is foundational to the CLL. In the years of the S3 project (2003 – 2025), more than 400 participants formed peer groups to explore ways to engage in Sabbath, Study and Service in ways that showed them how to access the resources they needed for professional development and their own well-being. A good many of those participants remained in ministry until retirement or are still actively engaged, according to my anecdotal records – social media, emails from colleagues, denominational and other news reports where so many familiar names pop up. The work the CLL did with the seminary to support first/early call CTS alums in the “Learning Together in Ministry” project (2004 – 2009) fostered a similar series of seminars and resulted in the formation of active clergy groups that continue to this day. The work we continue to do in all our programs is informed by what we learned and continue to learn from our work designed to support clergy and congregations to thrive together in ministry.

We made intentional decisions to partner with organizations or undertake leadership of programs such as Older Adult Ministry, The Coaching Institute at CTS (TCI@CTS), Leadership in Ministry and Ministering to Ministers so that we could strengthen our “age/stage” programming while not duplicating what other organizations offered. Our Spirituality Programs continue to discern how to provide courses so that church leaders may attend to the formation of those with whom they serve as congregational leaders or spiritual directors. We started and ended successful programs like the Youth Ministry Leadership Initiative (YMLI) when they were no longer sustainable – and when other providers existed that were doing the same type of thing as well or yes, even better.

Twenty-three years later, I'm wrapping up my work as Director of Lifelong Learning. My oldest son and his family live in Powder Springs and he is now employed at Lockheed. My younger son married his Decatur High girlfriend after they graduated from Auburn University, and they may well return to the area when he retires from the military. Our ties to the area are deep and strong. And remembering back

to that prayer to stay in Decatur? My call here has been marked with God's grace and abundance beyond measure. All along the way, my prayers were answered beyond what I could ask for or imagine.