



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

- 📖 Teaching as a Christian Vocation
(*Schools in a Pluralist Culture*, pp. 76-82)

Suggested Article:

- 📖 Spiritual Nourishment for Teachers
(*Schools in a Pluralist Culture*, pp. 88-92)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu.

Christian Reflection

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Teaching as a Christian Vocation

Regardless of the role to which their abilities and “deep gladness” lead them, teachers soon discover that their profession demands tremendous effort and commitment. Hope, grace, and hospitality are the keys to teachers’ flourishing amid the obstacles and frustrations that could easily breed disillusionment.

Prayer

Scripture Reading: 1 Corinthians 12:27-31

Meditation[†]

The basis of all ministry is the experience of God’s unlimited and unlimiting acceptance of us as beloved children, an acceptance so full, so total, and all-embracing, that it sets us free from our compulsion to be seen, praised, and admired and frees us for Christ, who leads us on the road of service. This experience of God’s acceptance frees us from our needy self and thus creates new space where we can pay selfless attention to others.

Henri Nouwen (1932-1996)[†]

Reflection

The Apostle Paul reminds the Christians at Corinth that wise teachers have been appointed and given special abilities by God to build up the body of Christ. Yet their words—like other gifted leaders who prophesy or speak in tongues—can strike listeners as so many annoying “noisy” and “clanging” sounds, if their teaching is not suffused with faith, hope, and love.

Minori Nagahara recalls she often felt simultaneously gifted but uselessly noisy, divinely called and yet clanging, when she was teaching sixth graders a Bronx, New York public school. “The challenges I faced as an inner-city teacher included working with students who came from dangerous home environments, were involved in gang activity, or were mentally ill, just to mention a few. These challenges were in addition to the daily grind of school life with its many tasks, campus politics, and—in the current educational climate—the constant pressure to raise test scores.”

Christian faith, hope, and love became for Nagahara “the key to survival and to flourishing in the midst of obstacles and frustrations that can breed disillusionment.” She identifies three aspects of effective teaching that require these spiritual resources.

- ▶ *Being an ongoing learner.* Teachers ask students to learn complex concepts, master difficult skills, and reflect on their lives. To do this well, teachers must commit themselves to continual intellectual, moral, and spiritual growth. Not only must they continue their academic studies, they must do research in their classrooms—gathering information, testing new ideas and methods, critiquing their practices.
- ▶ *Teaching and learning to live in community.* Teachers want the classroom to be “a just community in which students can thrive,” Nagahara notes. They can help by modeling care and respect for students. “Each day will bring new opportunities for problem solving and conflict resolution, as teacher and students—broken human beings that they are—learn to care for one another and



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work cooperatively to maintain peace in the classroom. Within this laboratory community, students will get a sense of what a thriving, healthy community looks like and how to be a contributing member of it.”

- ▶ *Being an agent of grace and hospitality.* Despite their best efforts, teachers and students make mistakes and hurt one another. Teachers can make the classroom “a place where forgiveness is offered when mistakes are made, where reconciliation and restoration are prioritized, where each person is loved and treated with fairness,” writes Nagahara. “Given the ever-growing ethnic and religious diversity in classrooms across the country, Christian teachers have a wonderful opportunity to [practice hospitality and] affirm their students’ God-given dignity, in spite of how others may rank them, or how students may rank themselves, in societal hierarchies.”

“The freedom that we experience in our identity as beloved children of God allows us to pursue our calling – whether that is teaching or in some other field – joyfully,” Nagahara concludes. “As we do so, we delight in the fact God himself delights in us and in the work of our hands that we offer back to him.”

Study Questions

1. In your opinion, what are the most difficult, frustrating, or disillusioning aspects of being a teacher today?
2. How do Christian faith, hope, and love help teachers flourish in the three dimensions of teaching that Minori Nagahara discusses – continual learning, teaching and learning to live in community, and being an agent of grace and hospitality?
3. According to Nagahara, how can a young person discern if “teaching is part of their Christian vocation and not just a passing interest or one career option”?
4. “Being a teacher is an isolating and lonely profession,” Sheila Gler claims in “Spiritual Nourishment for Teachers.” Do you agree? How could your congregation support teachers?

Departing Hymn: “Take Thou Our Minds, Dear Lord” (vv. 1 and 4)

Take thou our minds, dear Lord, we humbly pray,
give us the mind of Christ each passing day;
teach us to know the truth that sets us free;
grant us in all our thoughts to honor thee.

Take thou ourselves, O Lord, heart, mind, and will;
through our surrendered souls thy plans fulfill.
We yield ourselves to thee – time, talents, all;
we hear, and henceforth heed, thy sovereign call.

William H. Foulkes (1918)

Suggested Tunes: BREAD OF LIFE or ELLERS

† Henri Nouwen, *The Selfless Way of Christ: Downward Mobility and the Spiritual Life* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2007), 58.

Teaching as a Christian Vocation

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer Scripture Reading Reflection (skim all) Questions 1 and 2 Departing Hymn	Prayer Scripture Reading Reflection (all sections) Questions (selected) Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To review the major sources of frustration, loneliness, and disillusionment in teaching.
2. To discuss how Christian virtues of faith, hope, and love can encourage and strengthen teachers in their work.
3. To consider how congregations can support teachers.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 10-11 and ask members to read the Bible passages in the guide. Distribute copies of *Schools in a Pluralist Culture (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn “Take Thou Our Minds, Dear Lord” locate the familiar tune BREAD OF LIFE or ELLERS in your church’s hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ (www.hymntime.com/tch/).

Begin with a Story

“For many Christian teachers, the act of teaching—of creating opportunities and conditions which allow students’ learning and growth to take place—is not just a career choice, but is part of their vocation, their calling from God,” Minoru Nagahara observes. “I remember once, during my first year of teaching [in a public school in the Bronx, New York], walking home from school after a particularly difficult week of breaking up fights, trying to reason with angry, rebellious pre-adolescents, meeting with parents and administrators, and enduring unusually rowdy class sessions with my sixth graders. Trudging along, I mentally replayed various scenes from the week and worried about what the following week might bring. As my mind wandered to a list of other jobs in which I would not have to deal with the particular difficulties and challenges that I faced as a teacher, for a fleeting moment I wondered if I should have chosen a different line of work.”

“What kept me going at that point and at many other low points in my journey as a teacher was not a sense of grim determination to make things work, nor was it any extraordinary strength of character on my part. Rather, what allowed me to persevere was the belief that my work was meaningful and that I had been called to serve that place at that time.... Teaching had become a very concrete way in which I could practice and express my faith on a daily basis.”

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read 1 Corinthians 12:27-31 from a modern translation.

Reflection

As Minoru Nagahara reflects on her experience teaching sixth grade in an inner-city public school in the Bronx, New York, she recalls not only sources of frustration and disillusionment, but also the spiritual resources in her Christian faith that enabled her to flourish where God had called her. You might focus on those difficulties, on the spiritual resources she identifies, or her discussion of how young people can discern their gifts and calling to teach.

Study Questions

1. As you discuss the difficult aspects of teachings, encourage teachers in your group to share their experiences. They may mention difficulties related to students (e.g., lack of interest, focus on grades, behavior problems, lack of parental support, learning disabilities, tensions arising from diversity, drug problems), colleagues and institutional environment (e.g., lack of collegiality, unclear expectations, restrictions on the curriculum, emphasis on testing, poor administration, lack of resources), the community (lack of appreciation, demanding parents, low pay, new expectations for schools, social problems, lack of volunteers), or themselves (inadequate preparation, anxieties, distrust of colleagues, loneliness, vanity about their abilities, envy of others, regret, burnout, anger toward students or colleagues).
2. The need for *continual learning* makes teachers feel vulnerable about mastering new material, dealing with classroom problems, experimenting with new classroom practices, etc. They need faith that God has called and gifted them for these complex tasks, love for their students, and hope that God is working for good through friends and colleagues who help them face these tasks. *Teaching and learning to live in community* requires respect and appreciation for one another. Faith reminds teachers that their students are “created in the image of God and gifted with strengths and talents,” and love helps them “set the tone in their classrooms and...create an environment of respect for the variety of divine giftedness that we find in one another.” Every day requires “problem solving and conflict resolution, as teacher and students – broken human beings that they are – learn to care for one another and work cooperatively to maintain peace in the classroom.” *Being an agent of grace* means modeling the forgiveness one has received from God; grounded in God’s generous love, Christian *hospitality* welcomes and values students from diverse backgrounds and with various gifts. Grace and hospitality are based on hope, for they perceive the immense promise in individuals and help them “become all that God would have them to be.”
3. To discern if teaching is part of our vocation, Nagahara suggests we identify and affirm “the talents and abilities we have been given. This cannot be done with pride or arrogance.” In congregations, teachers can mentor young people to lead a discussion, prepare a lesson, or manage an activity for children in church classrooms or on mission trips. Another aspect of discernment is “to notice and care about different aspects of our broken and hurting world.” Congregations can help young people understand and care about specific educational needs within the congregation, the wider community, and beyond.
4. “Teachers make most decisions entirely alone,” Sheila Gloer explains. “They reflect on how to improve their teaching on their own. When looking for new ideas they turn to textbooks and resources that they search by themselves. They enter the classroom early in the morning full of hope for a new day with lessons carefully planned, materials ready, and procedures posted. When the students arrive, the door is shut and the teachers are alone with their charges. The students all have individual needs, individual learning styles, and individual goals to achieve. This is a daunting responsibility, and most teachers face it by themselves.”
 “Positive and constructive dialogue with colleagues and with other adults can help build community among teachers and lessen the feelings of isolation that result when teachers view their practice as a strictly private effort,” Nagahara agrees. Yet, she notes, “Teachers feel vulnerable when they allow others to enter their classroom to see their strengths as well as their shortcomings.”
 A congregation can publicly affirm teachers, help them network as spiritual friends as well as colleagues, encourage them to interpret their work as part of their Christian vocation, and provide opportunities for them to exercise and develop their gifts in service to the body of Christ. Sheila Gloer discusses devotional resources for teachers; a congregation might form a small group for teachers to enjoy these together.

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.