

Virtual Formation: A Year of Living Deeply?

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I will be sharing a shorter version of this paper at the conference to keep to the time limit.

Introduction

Formation as a word to describe initial ministerial training has a long history. According to Groom (2017: 233) formation was first mentioned in 1968 in the de Bunsen report *Theological Colleges for Tomorrow*. However, it is now synonymous with initial ministerial training, and ubiquitous in current writing e.g., *Formation for Ministry within a Learning Church* (2003), and *Common Awards in Theology, Ministry and Mission* (2014). In this paper I will be exploring formation and how the general ethos and principles are outworked within our Church in Wales ministry training programme, acknowledging the effect of Covid 19 on the last year of training, and reflecting on whether this in fact has made a difference.

Formation

Collicutt (2015) writes persuasively that formation is for every Christian, is the work of the spirit (not of institutions) and is to enable 'that person to be truly and fully herself. The Spirit is, after all, also the authentic Spirit of truth' (Collicutt 2015 chapter 1). In a refreshing antidote to ideas of formation as restricting or moulding into obedience, Collicutt's emphasis is on formation as growing into (Christ-like) freedom. Wilhoit (2008) would agree that formation is for everyone. It is 'the task of the church' (his emphasis) and even 'at the heart of its whole purpose for existence' (2008: 15). With these definitions in mind, this clarifies for me that our purpose at St Padarn's is to accompany candidates for ministry on a two or three year journey of an intense period of discipleship, a being formed in the likeness of Christ, rather than simply being equipped with skills, or gaining academic qualifications. This is so that they are therefore able to model as well as encourage their congregations to 'maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ' (Ephesians 4: 13).

A blog post by the poet Anthony Wilson helped me to find words to articulate this. He stated that he was himself attending to a year of living deeply and described it in this way:

In The Year of Living Deeply I am trying to attend to the things which feed me very much (family; friends; music; (re)reading; writing; poems; certain poets; sunsets) and spend less time attending to the things which seem to deplete my energy (Twitter (etc.); buying new stuff which I will never use; pretending I am sorted; wondering if what X said about me in 1997 is really true). It is not going wholly successfully. (Wilson 2018).

Using this language, I spoke in a sermon to our full-time candidates¹ in September 2018 that formation ‘is not about more knowledge and experiences. It’s about decluttering, stripping back...getting rid of the barriers between ourselves and God.’

Mayes (2009) uses the striking metaphor of a river to explain the significance of the role of prayer within ministerial training. He argues that a holistic model of training is not new, in fact it could be traced to Ancient Greek ideas of *paideia*, education as enabling the learner to participate meaningfully within a culture, with one aspect being the formation of character and values (2009: 13). This can be contrasted with a highly professionalised model of training, as seen in the nineteenth and twentieth century, or an approach that has been overly influenced by the demands of academia, which has been a tendency since the setting up of the Universities in the medieval period. However another tradition which has emphasised the integration of practice and theology, as foremost a spiritual discipline, aided by teachers and mentors who help their fellow travellers enter more deeply into the Christian tradition has also been an important strand within theological education, historically (Heywood 2021 chapter 2).

Mayes writes inspiringly of a ‘pneumatology of formation’ (2008: 117) echoing Collicutt’s argument that formation is the work of the Spirit. His metaphor of prayer (and theological reflection) as a hidden river running through all elements of formation is helpful, with its resonances of life, creativity, diversity, and flexibility (2008: 118). It is a move away from the language of competencies and checklists towards the language of communion. These insights would find general agreement amongst current theological educators, though Heywood is right to challenge us to practice our stated pedagogies (2020: 81). I now explore our own approach to formation through our practices, values, and pedagogy.

Integration

Central to our vision for ministerial training at St Padarn’s is ‘integrated formation’. This, of course is not unique, most current scholarship on theological education utilises the word (Cahalan 2012, 2017, Mayes, 2009, Heywood 2020). However, integrated formation also reaffirms what we know about being human and about learning. Smith encourages us to understand that ‘human beings are more fundamentally affective than cognitive’ (Smith 2009: 137) and so the whole package of training, something which those advocating for residential training have always appreciated, needs to be as much about community life and rhythms as about knowledge and competencies. Smith explains, writing about Christian education more generally:

An education, then, is a constellation of practices, rituals, and routines that inculcates a particular vision of the good life by inscribing or infusing that vision into the heart (the gut) by means of material, embodied practices (Smith 2009: 26).

Even if an emphasis on integration is not new within Christian pedagogies, it is even more important in the current age. Cahalan (2012) comments that this emphasis on integration comes at a ‘time of profound fragmentation’ (2012: 386). She stresses the importance of integration for identity; crucial for programmes which claim to be about developing vocation (2012: 388). Vocational work during formation is vital as it is about accepting and engaging

¹ We refer to our ministerial students as ‘candidates’ as they are training for both ordained and lay ministries.

with a new ministerial identity, against the backdrop of a Western world consumed with struggles and political debates about identity (Cahalan 2012: 388).

Above all, an integrative approach reflects the 'integrating character of God' (Graham in Cahalan, Foley and Miksoki 2017: foreword).

Character and practical wisdom

Although no one involved in theological education would argue that it is possible to pack everything you need to know about ministry into two or three years, this is sometimes our unintentional discourse. For example, a Facebook group for ministers is called *Things they didn't teach us in seminary*, and individuals and interest groups within the Church in Wales will point out, critically and sometimes erroneously, that there are vital gaps, usually a theme or subject important to them, in the syllabus. I also feel an inner pressure and guilt about what is not covered within the core curriculum. I need to braver about emphasising the practical wisdom and reflective practice nature of our pedagogy.

Even if it were possible to teach everything a minister needs to know, and every skill they need to have, in the initial training period, this would be fruitless. The nature of society and ministry is changing rapidly. This Covid season is a case in point. We could never have predicted that a key ministerial skill for 2020-21 would be the ability to stream services on YouTube and create and edit well designed and attractive videos. This was not something that would have been taught in the past, and yet clergy during Covid took action in order to learn these (often) new skills.

The enormous amount of learning that happened in 2020-21 in the use of technology in ministry bears out the arguments of Schon (1987), that professional training should be about reflective practice, developing an appreciation of 'artistry' in the professional so that they are able to handle and even flourish in different experiences, rather than teaching them a textbook response to every situation. This practical wisdom, and curiosity to improve practice that has been the hallmark of more recent theological education bore fruit in the innovative ways clergy and lay leaders and ministers have sought to serve their churches and communities during the pandemic.

Reflective practice as a concept, and especially in its outworking, can be critiqued for being too focussed on individuals. Exploring our own personal 'meaning making' (Hunt 2010: 156) is interesting but potentially fails to address outer and often controlling forces which seek to manipulate the professions (Hunt 2010: 158). Examples of this would be portfolios which are time consuming and can be highly prescriptive with checklists of competencies. Reflective practice has also become a buzzword, overused so that it has become devoid of meaning.

Hunt however argues that a reflective practice methodology imbued with spirituality rescues it from some of these tendencies and challenges us to ask the question (like all good theological reflection) what difference will this make? She maintains, quoting Brookfield that it 'must always be linked to how the world can be changed' (Hunt 2010: 158).

This way of thinking about education and training is also well expressed by the phrase 'practical wisdom', derived from the Aristotelian idea of *phronesis*, an 'integrative knowing' of various and distinctive forms of knowledge leading to practical action, insight and

transformed thinking (Cahalan 2017: 205). Heywood explains what a reflective practice and practical wisdom approach attempts to inculcate:

This capacity to discern the nature of a situation, the way it corresponds to other similar situations and the way in which it is unique, and to interpret that situation by placing it in an appropriate framework of understanding, situates *phronesis* as the intellectual virtue that enables us to apply the virtues of character to specific situations (2020: 71).

This exploration, and my reading of the literature, reminds me that despite the pressures, holding on to a 'reflective practice' approach for professional training, including ministerial formation, is crucial.

What is formation then in everyday language? To explore this with our candidates, I reflected with them on what this has meant for me in my own formational journey and came up with my own seven facets of formation. This was based on my experience of ministry, as well as what I have observed in others. This has not been the only structure for our explorations together, we have also used other lenses e.g., the themes of Fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5), Wisdom and New Life for our reflections.

Seven facets of formation

I would emphasise from the outset that these 'facets' are not in any way definitive, for myself, let alone for anyone else. However, these are the aspects of my own inner life that I have been working on within my own relationship with God. Or perhaps it is more accurate to say, that God has been working on, in me.² They are integrated in so much as they are reflections on both my practice as well as theology of ministry and reflects how I have approached learning in its entirety.

1. Ego

Here, ego should be thought of in the normal, non-technical use of the word. Despite having listened to several sermons about 'losing myself' and the importance of selflessness, the book that has helped me think through issues of ego the most has been the self-help book by Steven Sylvester (2016) *Detox your Ego*.

In this book he speaks about his own experience of failing to perform well as a cricketer at elite level, because he became overwhelmed with wanting to perform well and improve. This inward focus, and feelings of anxiety and fear, stopped him from fulfilling his potential. In other words, he had problems with his ego. In his later work as a psychologist, particularly his research into elite sportsmen and women, he found that truly excellent practice comes from those who can set aside their ego and perform for a bigger goal than simply proving themselves to others. Their focus must be on another objective such as performing well for their team, the nation or their family and friends and not themselves. Furthermore, successful sportspeople are genuinely free because they enjoy what they do,

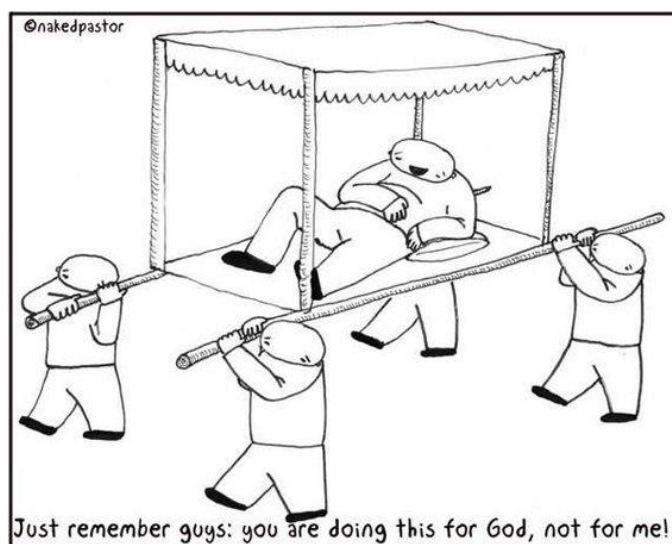
² See 2 Corinthians 3: 15, Galatians 4: 19. When I shared this initially, this was in the context of an earlier session which was an exegesis of Psalm 139.

and ironically, by concentrating on improving and mastering their skills for their own sake, rather than winning, they in fact win.

My own reflections on this is that many candidates and ordained ministers are caught in cycles of seeking acceptance and praise to make up for a lack of self-confidence. They become too inward looking, worrying whether their ministerial skills are good enough, and whether they as people are acceptable enough. But this is a form of ego temptation. This is certainly true of my experience. It was transformational for me when I knew I could reframe my desire to preach a good sermon away from proving myself as a minister and gaining the acceptance of others for preaching a 'good' sermon to genuinely desiring to share with the hearers something I felt God was wanting me to share. My observation is that a lack of confidence and self-acceptance, despite the riches of our biblical teaching on God's love and healing, is paralyzing; and that often good ministers waste their time seeking superficial acceptance from others.

2. *Embrace normality*

When I shared this as a talk, I spoke about the difference between the football managers Jurgen Klopp and Jose Mourinho. Mourinho has been said to refer to himself as 'the special one' because of his (past) ability to win football trophies and Klopp joked back that he was the 'normal one' (This is Anfield: 2015). In the discernment process, candidates are encouraged to speak in terms of God having called them as individuals to fulfil a special role for him. How do we avoid narcissism if we take this seriously? Perhaps by recognising that God calls everyone in different ways, and that ordained and lay ministry is no more special than any other vocation. We are normal. The best way I can describe this is by this warning from this cartoon by the naked pastor:



3. *Be authentic*

This is a version of the point Collicutt is making, which I have alluded to earlier. Again, when we look at performers or artists, the successful ones embrace their uniqueness, and do not try to copy someone else's act or style. What makes them successful is to emphasise their strengths and distinctiveness. I was also struck by the poet Billy Collins (2021) who said in a

poetry course that you should ask of each poem ‘what is it about this poem that no-one else could have written.’ The same is true of life and ministry. We all have our own contribution to make. The times when I am failing to fulfil my potential is when I am trying to be someone else or trying to please by being a blander version of myself. My most successful academic work, poetry, relationships and even contribution to meetings is when I have admittedly struggled with, but have eventually found, my own ‘voice’.

4. Enjoy play

Play is important theologically as a foretaste of the kingdom (Goto 2016: 134-135). Liturgy can also be seen as a form of play (Goto 2016: 84). Like poetry, play is a different mode of being. We should cherish it and learn from it. Above all, it helps us not to take ourselves too seriously. It also puts joy centre stage. It is deliberately non utilitarian, but what is life if it is not about joy? I now embrace this rather than worry if people think I am not very bright or capable because I am not totally serious all the time! Humour can also play an important part in forming and promoting community.

5. Develop trust and loyalty

Bonem and Patterson (2005) speak of a leadership bank account – that leaders can gain and lose capital with those they work amongst. In my own ministry I have found this insight to be vital and I have learnt not to devalue the importance of spending time with those I lead doing ‘nothing’, recognising that developing trust and loyalty takes time and is priceless. I will also deliberately look for opportunities to prove that I can be trusted and that their loyalty is not misplaced. One learning from me has been around accepting feedback and criticism. I realised that how I respond to feedback and criticism from members of my team or from our students either encourages it or stifles it, so I deliberately try and respond well each time, even when I feel irritated. I have also learnt that if I am in a new situation with people who do not know me, that I may need to take a shortcut to reassure people of my ability e.g., even though it goes against the grain I will introduce myself if I am doing a talk and mention my experience and (if appropriate) qualifications to be doing the talk. Unfortunately, as a woman I need to be able to reassure others of my experience and knowledge.

6. Notice negative emotions

I have found that negative emotions for me are an important source of data in terms of how I am grounded (or not) or spiritually healthy (or not). If I find that I am viscerally and emotionally feeling resentment, the need to win, or concerned about my status and whether this is being respected, there is something wrong with me spiritually and emotionally. I need to attend this.

7. Let go of the need to control

This is a continuation of the previous facet. If I notice I really need something to happen or someone to do something, for me to feel safe or happy, I know I am being motivated by anxiety not love and I need to attend to this (see Yaconelli 2006:79). Unfortunately, I also see this in others, where the need to feel safe overrides everything else, and pain is flung out in unhelpful ways. Attending to our own healing is not only vital for ourselves, but for others. As Rohr said, ‘If we do not transform our pain, we will most assuredly transmit it’

(2018). Dealing with our own pain is vital in formation, and in the end training for ministry is about serving others, not self-fulfilment. At the very least, our ministries should not cause pain to others.

How is formation different online?

Normally, issues of character and practical wisdom (or ego, negative emotions, the need to control and so on....) are discussed in regular one to one meetings with tutors as well as in the formational cells. The candidate takes a lead on discussing what they are addressing for themselves, though sometimes tutors will gently raise areas of concern, either from community life, placement, classes, or any other aspect of the training. We were able to move one to one and cell meetings online easily using Zoom or Microsoft Teams. However, if training is integrated, what does it mean for formation to happen virtually? In some ways, there has been very little difference – it has been possible to conduct even our assessment meetings with psychotherapists online. There are advantages to online meetings – the candidate has more control over their immediate surroundings, and they are more convenient in terms of travel. We were surprised as to how well some of the more formational meetings worked online, mirroring the positive experience we had with academic teaching through Zoom.

I was initially concerned that we would not get to know candidates as well if we were not eating and socialising with them during the Wednesday to Friday programme and so we would not be able to assess any formational issues that needed addressing. However, my observation was that candidates still displayed the usual theological and inter-personal tensions, and the usual under confidence - over confidence cycle of negotiating a new identity, in lectures, placement and worship groups. The main difference was that tensions in the community were perhaps slightly less intense, but also not as easily resolved given that members of the full-time community were not meeting informally over lunch or in the common room.

We maintained the liturgical rhythms online, and so were able to replicate the embodied 'constellation of practices, rituals, and routines.' (Smith 2009: 26) I have mentioned previously. It is simply that all our bodies were separated by space. In fact, my experience of God was stronger and more visceral, on Zoom in my study than most, even Eucharistic, worship I have encountered in college chapel or a hotel conference room. One striking occasion was when the theme of our 2020 summer school was spirituality, and our guide led us in several different spiritual practices to be able to experience them for ourselves as well as help others to pray in parish ministry. These few days were amongst the most life, giving and godly training I have ever experienced. Our evaluations of the summer school revealed that my own experience was shared amongst most of our candidates.

One difference was that every candidate has really been equal in that we all are the same size and shape on a screen, and those who are used to using their bodies to dominate could no longer do this – similarly people who have a lesser presence in the flesh were able to develop a more confident online presence. However, we all missed not being able to have those incidental and surprising conversations that cannot be planned, the informal 'water cooler' moments.

However, in some ways we were living off past ‘capital,’ the community and ethos we had built already with the second and third year candidates, and the relationships we had developed with them face to face. The new candidates were inducted into this community, one which had been constructed in the physical world. Furthermore, several candidates reported they felt less prepared for face-to-face work and were delighted when they could resume with some placement work face to face. It is normal for ordinands to feel anxious and nervous as they approach their ordination date – these feelings were particularly heightened this year.

How was my formation different online?

One important piece of learning for me was around my own confidence as a teacher. On March 18th, 2020, we were facing our last day of Quality Assurance Agency Inspection (QAA) and we had just taken the decision to cease all face-to-face teaching in the Institute. The two modules which we were teaching across Wales part time were both mine, and I was aware that the next few weeks meant turning these modules into fully asynchronous online sessions, as well as having to work with our team to move the full-time formation programme online. It was a stressful time.

One module that I was teaching was an *Introduction to Practical Theology*, and I conducted tens of short video meetings with part time students about their assignment. This, alongside marking around fifty to sixty assignments, helped me see that students needed help with theological reflection methods in making it simpler, and trusting in their own innate ability to do this. This could only be done with practice. That final term in 2020 we found that we had passed our QAA inspection – so this also gave me confidence that I was able to perform in that world, in that language.

So, when the module *Introduction to Practical Theology* came round again in 2021, this time taught to full time students, I adopted a new approach. Theological reflection is notoriously difficult to teach (see Pattison and Lynch 2005, 2005: 152, Smith 2008: 25). However, the experience of the previous year meant that I had also grown in my own understanding and confidence as a teacher, someone who could speak the (foreign to me) language of QAA, and someone who was a year on in my experience as an educator, having been schooled in the experience of tens of part time students struggling with what theological reflection meant.

I devoted three sessions to teaching theological reflection as opposed to two as I had done previously. I also condensed my own teaching and input and spent the majority of the three sessions on practicing the two methods I had chosen - critical conversation (Pattison 1989) and Todd’s enhanced pastoral cycle (Todd in Thompson and Pattison 2005: 10) with scenarios and questions from the students themselves. I noticed in myself that my increased experience (and confidence) meant that I did not feel I had to prove myself as a teacher, I could wholly focus on the learning. I no longer felt ashamed if I stuttered or was struggling along with the students to make theological meaning out of their situations. I was happy to change my mind and acknowledge that students had more theological insight into a situation than I did. After all, the expert in any given situation was those who were experiencing it. I could be a fellow learner.

Conclusion

This year and a half of living deeply has been formational for me as well as hopefully for our candidates. It has been affirming to be able to respond quickly and nimbly to a crisis and find that our reflective practice approach to learning is effective. This has given me added impetus to continue to hold on as we emerge out of this Covid season to the sense of formation as a process that we accompany rather than learning we administer.

Despite my concerns, we did (as tutors) get to know candidates well and were able to work with them on issues of character and practical wisdom. I saw candidates blossom as they embraced a new identity as candidates for ministry and as students of a rich theological tradition. We learnt new skills and practices, especially in teaching online groups and courses and in having more effective meetings as a dispersed staff team.

However, in many ways we were living on borrowed time, the relationships that had been built through meals on campus, in-jokes in classes and late-night conversations in the pub in the academic year previously. What we missed was priceless; the surprising, spontaneous, and unplanned conversations that cannot be timetabled into a curriculum.

If ministerial training is to be truly formational it must be integrative, embodied and practically wise. Some of this can be achieved by looking at each other through screens in our own homes. But eventually ministry must involve us going out and finding God in unexpected places and unexpected people.

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Appendix

In this paper I have argued about the importance of integrated formation. However, at St Padarn's we also use the phrase to distinguish our practice from being a contextual (as in St Mellitus), residential, or non-residential approach (as in more recent traditional patterns).³

³ For more information about this, see the principal's theological exploration of our pedagogy: Jeremy Duff (2018) *Formational Excellence in this Generation: The theological basis for St Padarn's approach to full time ordination training* Unpublished.

This is because we adopt all three approaches. Our pedagogy is unashamedly contextual. Full time candidates spend 2 days a week on placement as part of the ministry team. However, the programme is both residential and non-residential. We spend a considerable amount of time together both in the training formational community and with other formational communities. For thirty weeks of the year all full-time candidates (married and single) are fully residential every Wednesday to Friday, travelling to our Cardiff site from all parts of Wales, and part time and full-time candidates come together for three weekends and one week a year.

In this way we can sidestep the debate about whether residential or non-residential is best – we believe both have value. In fact, we do not have the luxury of working out which training package is ideal. We have had to adopt a pragmatic approach, and what will deliver the best training experience for lay and ordained candidates, of different ages and backgrounds, located in all parts of Wales with different caring responsibilities. I explore this further below.

Integration is part of the architecture of the formation we offer at St Padarn's. We have four building blocks – placement, residentials teaching the theology and practice of ministry, formational cells where candidates are given a space to reflect on the whole process of formation and academic learning. Although the formational cells are clearly a space for this integration to occur, every aspect of the course is 'disrupted' to be integrated.

For example, the part time BTh many candidates follow is taught in a blended way. The main methodology is local education groups alongside fellow learners from the churches in the area. Furthermore, assignments combine the practical, theoretical, and reflective. Ministerial skills are taught within a theoretical and theological framework. It is also important to stress that we train lay and ordained ministers alongside one another, full and part time. Other integrative practices include interdisciplinarity in modules, and an intentionality about not using church labels that limit our understanding of both ourselves and the Christian tradition.

Limiting factors

Recently, John McGinley speaking at a conference called MultiplyX 2021 about church planting spoke about clergy, training, and buildings as 'key limiting factors', creating a storm of protest from both clergy and those involved with theological education (Davies 2021). I do not want to comment on this here, only that the phrase limiting factors is interesting – in the Church in Wales we have several constraints, and this makes our training more, not less, productive - a case of the irritant in an oyster producing the pearl.

Amongst them are:

Serving the Church in Wales

St Padarn's is the training arm of the Church in Wales. Our close relationship with the bishops as well as clergy, laity and churches means that we are in a better position to serve the actual needs of the Church, rather than what we might imagine they are. We can also address these needs quickly – a bishop might email us on a Friday about a training need, and we can address it in a sermon on a Wednesday, a Leading Healthy Churches slot on a Thursday or a class on a Friday.

Diverse people and traditions

The Church in Wales serves all the communities in Wales in their diversity. It is also a broad church, with worshippers from all traditions and backgrounds. We have no choice as individuals but to work closely with people who have very different theologies and practices from ourselves. This is true within the tutorial and staff team too. This brings with it great creativity and commitment to understanding each other as well as reminding us of our commitment to an integrative approach.

Bilingualism

We serve a bilingual church. Just under 30% of our population can speak Welsh, and some of our communities are majority Welsh speaking, for example Gwynedd has 77% of the population as Welsh speakers (Welsh Government 2021). At St Padarn's we have a bilingual language policy, so although most of our teaching is in English, documents and publicity are in both languages. It is possible to present work and fill in a myriad of forms in either language, as well as have a Welsh speaking personal tutor. This leads to a certain flexibility in our ethos as well as an attitude where we are constantly looking at issues in at least two different ways. However, we also need to be bilingual in all that we do – the ministerial formation discourse and the Quality Assurance discourse are very different ways of looking at a common task. We are used to living and working in two languages, and so we can negotiate these different discourses with some confidence.

Pragmatism

Finally, we have had to adopt a pragmatic approach. This rescues us from ideological commitments to certain pedagogies. In the end the question for us is, is this do-able and are we able to deliver this in the budget we have been allocated, with the personnel we have, to the people we are serving and training.

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