



**The Maine School of Ministry (MESOM)**  
Christian Studies and Leadership (CSL) Curriculum and Certificate Program  
Maine Conference, United Church of Christ  
One Weston Court, Suite 104, Augusta ME 04330  
**Student Testimony, gathered Fall 2018 by RH Ross**

**Student 1**

**ChHi-Pb 2 Practicing Torah- Branches of Judaism**

The instructor was so knowledgeable and presented the classroom material in a way that made it easier to understand. She made it very interesting. I am not typically an audio learner, but I could listen to her all day and take away an immense amount of new information.

Visiting the temples and practicing at a Jewish Worship services was one of the most enlightening experiences of my life. The roots of various spirituality practices came to light and brought it full circle. It became the base of my future classes and helped me experience the history of Christianity to the fullest.

**Student 2**

**PrTh-Pb 4: Church Practice—Worship**

This hands-on, practical course is intended to teach one how and why we worship the way we do. Whether through a traditional Order of Worship, the Eucharist, or a funeral – how do we expose real “God moments” to those who worship? We were taught both how to do it the “traditional” way, and how we might bring our creative selves forward.

While I expected to fumble my way through a wedding service or communion, what I did not expect was the transformation in myself. How was I the right person to offer this blessing? Could I really fulfill the priestly role that might be expected of me? It turns out that I can.

**PrTh-Pb 3: Church Practice—Whence Ministry?**

Our society and our churches are changing. Everywhere we turn there is a tension between embracing our history or doing church differently. If the next generations can't find the sacred within, why should they waste their time?

This course put forward both the challenges AND the opportunities in church and ministry. We were exposed to the dynamics of modernity, but also the opportunity of community churches and special population ministry. This was a unrelenting look at the church in today's society with an warm invitation to invent it anew

**ChHi-Pb 1: Practicing the Word—Branches of Christianity and ChHi-Pb 2 Practicing Torah- Branches of Judaism**

These two courses explored the history and tradition that leads us to the current religious landscape. How did Protestants and Roman Catholics get here? Are the Jews recalcitrant deniers with a legalistic bent? But more than a history lesson, there was a desire to understand and appreciate the other.

Nothing can substitute for the opportunity to sit across from a Catholic priest and discuss his perspective. One can read about Orthodox Christianity all day but standing amongst the icons teaches in a way that words cannot. I have had the opportunity to worship with Orthodox Jew and Reformed. My understanding of my own faith has been deepened and expanded through real interaction with other faith traditions.

**Student 3**

**PrTh-Pb 2: Church Practice--Congregation Life and Leadership**

Even though I had my M.Div and already had a parish, I took this course because I needed it; I hadn't taken a course on leadership and congregational life while in seminary. I liked the course because it was practical: We learned to assess our own congregations and ourselves as leaders and to work with the implications of those

outcomes. The course was also helpful in terms of talking about where the church has been, why the church is changing and where it is going. We had many guests, but I especially recall the ones from Maine churches who are doing new things as they feel led by God. Dr. Nordbeck's teaching style is invitational and inclusive. One valuable take-away I appreciated was Dr. Nordbeck's encouragement for us to always be thinking theologically, to ask ourselves "where is God in \_\_\_\_\_." The diversity of the students in terms of where we were all at in our ministerial path made for rich conversations and perspectives.

I came to appreciate MESOM because of my experience with this one course. The Dean and staff at MESOM have realized that a good theological education can follow wherever God leads. God is leading many away from a full-time journey with a seminary and more into the realities of juggling life, families, jobs and God's calling. MESOM is working the reality of folks who have full lives and are also full of a desire to work for God.

#### **Student 4**

##### **BibSt-Fdn 3: Torah, Histories and BibSt-Fdn 4: Prophecy, Poetry, Wisdom**

I took Bible Foundations 3 and 4 (the Old Testament). I loved discussing the readings using historical critical thinking, for this was a new way of analyzing the Bible for me, which brought new insights into how I understand the Bible. In addition, the other students would understand a book differently than I would, which was fascinating and enlightening.

It was surprising and reassuring to see contradictions and discrepancies in the story line of various passages. Learning that these passages were put together by different authors and also edited by later authors helped me to see the progression in theological understanding as it related to the historical context. I was so excited to see that "dogma" is not firmly or unchangeably established! When another student presented how much he enjoyed Ecclesiastes, his enthusiasm rubbed off on me, for I had found the book to be so uninspiring and depressing.

#### **Student 5**

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#### **Student 6**

##### **ChHi-Pb 2 Practicing Torah- Branches of Judaism**

This June I have been taking a class with the Maine School of Ministry. It's called 'Practicing Torah: The Branches of Judaism'. The last class is this coming Saturday where we will be talking about 'Preaching without Contempt.' Included as part of the class have been three field trips to visit Saturday Shabbat services in three settings: Orthodox, Conservative and Reform. Along with history and biblical scholarship through the last 3,000 years in a classroom, these visits were a first-hand experience of the power of a small verse in Deuteronomy at the beginning of the Wilderness Journey in the life of the Hebrew people.

*Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. (Deut. 6:4-9)*

In the Orthodox service all men present took part in leadership - in prayers and in Torah reading. This included three teenagers who led with maturity and poise and were seen as equals and full participants. One man brought his five-year old son with him when he came forward for his portion of the Torah - and they chanted that portion together. And although most of the service was in Hebrew the chanting and the singing created a holy ground of prayer. The service was two and a half hours.

In the Conservative service everyone participated and there was much more English. However, after the Torah reading, the Rabbi came down from the pulpit and sat down - and led a participatory response to the scripture - what it meant then and now - what questions or wonderings do you have. The service was two hours.

In the Reformed Service the same thing happened after the chanting of prayers and Torah - when the rabbi asked, 'what do you think?' a gentleman answered and the Rabbi said 'Defend yourself.' And a free-wheeling, lively conversation ensued. In this case, after about 15 minutes, the Rabbi said, 'let's go downstairs'. We all went down, had coffee and goodies and sat around a table continuing the conversation for another hour.

I have learned that Judaism is in the same quandary as mainline denominations. Fewer participants, aging members, and people being too busy.

Interestingly, in the Reform service, when we went downstairs for the 'second hour', there were three persons who joined the conversation at that point. One of them told me that she doesn't get much from the service upstairs, but the conversation downstairs is what feeds her.

Could it be that as we are dis-established from being a mainline denomination we are being invited by the Spirit into re-claiming the deep reading of Scripture that has always been the well-spring of church renewal.

The study of scripture is foundational to a teaching ministry that re-claims scriptural images and allusions in order to reclaim the language of our particular heritage and our unique perspective on life - to re-claim that which distinctively marks our congregations as Christian communities. But critical study of the Word is not enough. The whole point of studying scripture is asking the question: "What is God saying to the church today through the particular text in front of us?" "What is God saying to US?" The community use of *lectio divina* as a way to engage the text certainly needs to stand hand in hand with historical-critical exegesis.

Our churches' ministry must be transformed into continuing Christian formation for members old and new. What does it mean for us to worship God? How can we pray in a way that makes a difference? What kind of life does a Christian life look like, not just on Sunday but on Monday as well?

Even as the Hebrew washed over me in each of these services and took me to a deep place in my soul, Is this call of the Spirit inviting us all into recovering our first language - the language of God, of bible, of theology - so that we might speak about it with others - in and out of the church.

## **Student 7**

### **ThEth-Pb 1: Theological Reflection and ThEth-Pb 2: Ethical Reflection**

I'm the oddball who took two MeSOM courses out of order just for the fun of it. I want more, especially after you and I spoke earlier this year. That was when you helped me more than you know to set my life priorities. What a good listener you are: You heard what I was saying when I couldn't hear it myself. Anyway, I want to chime in with some feedback on the two courses I took -- if that would be appropriate.

The first course I took through MeSOM was "Theology/Ethics Practice 1--Practicing Theology: Theological Reflection," with Rev. Dr. Susan Stonestreet. What I most liked about the course and the instructor was the positive atmosphere in the room as we all came together to bathe in Christian thought. That may sound esoteric, but I just come alive when I am around kindred spirits, people who really "get it" what Jesus' message was all about. There is just so much noise around today about what some *think* he was about that I found it refreshing to be near those who share my own truth. Call me tribal, but that sense of a healing, like-minded community is important to me. A bit of "remember when, ha, ha" from this course: I shared during one session that sometimes when I left the class I did so with "my hair on fire," I was so spiritually recharged. Susan thought this (unoriginal) comment was hilarious. Funny? Maybe. True? Absolutely.

The second course I took at MeSOM was "ThEth Survey 2: Christian Ethics" with Rev. Dr. Marvin Ellison. What was great about this class--in addition to the fact that I was able to convince my wife to join me for the course--was the chance it offered me to write out some thoughts about both same-sex marriage and death with dignity. The challenge to put my feelings/beliefs into concrete sentences was helpful as well as healing. Useful, too, as I took the risk of sharing my essay on the latter topic with my then 90-year-old father, with whom I've never discussed death with or without dignity. He read the piece, but never said much about it until I pressed him on the matter. *That* told me something. What I think of about the course with a smile is the great syllabus. Oh, my. Those articles, those books! I ate up everyone of them and wanted more.

On that note, I'll stop and say that again -- I want more! I thank you, Pastor Bob (Do others call you that or is it just me?), for encouraging me to be a theology autodidact. It's working and has become an important part of my day, this reading of works such as my current challenge, James Carroll's *Constantine's Sword*.

Peace be with you and I hope this message is useful. It took me back ... and "made me smile."

#### **Student 8**

##### **PrTh-Pb 5: Church Practice--Pastoral Care**

I marvel at the positive spirit that was evoked in Susie's presentation. It is inspiring to me, especially to know that even the most challenging moments can be part of the feast, part of the dance. Even the most challenging people can also be part of it. I hope to incorporate this generous spirit in my own practice, whatever it turns out to be. Susie very well put into words what it means to be harkening to the promptings of the Holy Spirit in times of discouragement.

#### **Student 9**

Bob, Happy New Year!!! Thank you for the reminder email today. I just finished registering for both courses. Last week I took the time to order my books and they all have arrived have as of today. It is hard to believe this is my last semester at MESOM! Time has flown by very quickly. Thank you for your dedication and hard work bringing wonderful courses to all of Maine for the past four years. Without the opportunity to take classes on Saturdays, I would not have been able to attend school and keep working. From the bottom of my heart, Bob, thank you!