Who am I becoming?: Understanding the ministry training portfolio as a theological practice

Tim Gibson
UWE Bristol, UK

Abstract
This article outlines a theological basis for the process of compiling a portfolio as part of a programme of ministerial formation. Such a task can often seem to the candidate rather like jumping through hoops, or gathering evidence merely for the sake of it. But I argue that it is properly understood as a theological practice, inviting reflection on who they are becoming in Christ. In philosophical literature, ‘gestures’ are understood as incomplete actions that correspond to some deeper truth. By framing the task of portfolio composition in the language of ‘gesture’, it is seen to be a vital practice in formation for public ministry, rather than merely an exercise in proving one’s readiness for ordination or licensing.

Keywords
learning outcomes, ministerial formation, portfolios, professional ministerial competencies, theological anthropology, theology of gesture

Preliminary remarks: why portfolio assessment has a bad reputation
Those who oversee the training of candidates for public ministry in a variety of denominations will be familiar with the challenge of evidencing, and assessing,
their experience and attainment of key professional skills and learning outcomes. The solution most frequently reached for is the portfolio: a collection of evidence, reflections on practice, skills audits and such like that seeks to demonstrate a trainee’s readiness for licensing.

The difficulty of the portfolio is that it can easily come to be seen as a tick-box process through which candidates garner little self-knowledge and show little of their creative or theological abilities, still less giving a sense of the person or minister they are becoming.

In this article, I argue that portfolio composition should be cast in a different light. I suggest that it is a theological practice that involves exploration of who we have been, recognition of who we are now, and an expression of hope and longing for who we are to become. In order to make sense of that, I borrow the language of ‘gesture’ from philosophical literature, denoting a human activity that is capable of revealing something deeper, more meaningful, than what it appears to contain in itself. As a basis for rethinking the ministerial training portfolio, such a concept moves us away from an instrumental understanding and towards one that sees it as a theological and profoundly formational practice that participates in the story of redemption by holding past, present and future in creative tension.

Examples from ministerial formation

Peter

It was obvious to anyone who spent time with Peter1 that he was a gifted minister, with much to offer his sponsoring church. A skilled illustrator and writer, he drew on his creativity to offer a ministry that was life-giving to many. He was a man of graciousness and profound faith, but struggled with the formalities of the training context, especially when it came to recording and reflecting on his training experiences by reference to his denomination’s criteria for licensing.

The portfolio, then, was Peter’s downfall: how could he overcome his reticence to pull together the evidence needed? This included a record of monthly meetings with his training supervisor, feedback forms on his preaching and worship leading, a diary of his pastoral visiting and reflective practice. Many of these documents eluded him, and the deadline for portfolio submission loomed.

As panic set in, I sat with Peter in a prayerful encounter after morning chapel during a residential weekend. I encouraged him to think of the portfolio in a different way: not as an exercise in gathering evidence but as a chance to interrogate his becoming in Christ. Use it not as an audit of skills and experience, I suggested, but as a chance to tell a theological story about your formation. Think back to where you came from at the start of this process, consider who you were then. Look forward to what God is calling you into, ask who you are becoming. Then consider where you are now, knowing that it is a moment on your journey of responding to God’s will.
Pauline

Pauline was different from Peter. Disorder and disorganization were anathema to her. She was one of the most focused students I have ever worked with: every deadline highlighted in her diary, a clear plan of action for getting things done. Unlike many, her portfolio was by no means a last-minute affair. She pulled together detailed records of every conversation with her training supervisor, every feedback form on an element of her ministerial practice. She included funeral service orders, harvest supper menus, Christmas letters. As a body of evidence, her paperwork was hard to fault.

Yet, as I surveyed it in a tutorial, it left me feeling uninspired. It bore little relation to the vibrant, loving disciple of Christ I saw before me. It portrayed her as carefully executing the tasks before her with little openness to God’s grace surging through the cracks. This wasn’t the Pauline I knew, not the loving deacon I’d seen ministering to her local congregation. So, how to encourage her to tell a different story, to do better justice to the minister and person she was surely growing into?

The answer lay in a similar conversation to the one I had with Peter: tell us a story about who you’ve been, who you are now and who you’re growing into. Use these records as source material for your composition of self, understood in relation to God and God’s will for you. Ask yourself at every turn: who am I becoming in Christ’s company?

Telling stories

At the heart of my advice to these two very different students was a suggestion not to see the portfolio as a collection of evidence woven into a matrix of proof. Crucially, though, nor were they engaging in a simple act of self-projection. This wasn’t a story solely about themselves, but about the God who was drawing them to a particular vocation and equipping them with all that they needed to flourish as his ‘companions’, called as we all are to a unique future in him.²

We might say that I was encouraging these candidates in the composition of self, insofar as I encouraged them to narrate their experiences as they perceived them and were given expression through the lens of their personhood. Their accounts, like all portfolios, were therefore innately and unavoidably subjective, because they were about themselves, their contexts, their vocations. But at the heart of my conceptualization of their task was a belief that such an activity is always oriented towards an objective reality that both transcends and is apprehended in and through our experience.

This objective reality is perhaps best expressed, borrowing from Samuel Wells, as ‘the nature and destiny of humankind’, which is, namely, reunion with God in the ‘final consummation of the eschaton’.³ In other words, our creaturely existence, understood theologically, is always oriented towards that which goes ahead of us: namely, the kingdom, in which we long to find our place.
Peter and Pauline, then, like all ministerial candidates and all disciples, were called to give an account of themselves not for its own sake, but because through such an account of our experience we are better able to participate in the process of apprehending what God calls us into, what he calls us to become, and therefore to be formed for that becoming.

That is a complex idea that gives the lie to the apparent simplicity with which Pauline was able to compile her first draft and explains the nature and origin of Peter’s struggles. Understood theologically, a portfolio is more – far more – than a collection of paperwork and evidence. If form and content are taken together, we should expect portfolios to be rather messy and imprecise, since the subjects they narrate are messy and imprecise. At the same time, we should expect them to have some capacity to transcend the particularity they are describing, to overcome their messiness and imprecision, and reveal something of the destiny not just of this person, but of the whole creation.

It is worth, briefly, considering what the content of such a messy and imprecise portfolio may include. The answer is simple: all that a regular portfolio contains, but understood not as a complete account of the candidate’s formation but rather as a gathering of fragments, only capable of exceeding itself through recognition of its incompleteness. Such a view will of course shape the detail, not least of the candidate’s reflections on their experience: instead of seeing this as evidence of their readiness to be accepted in their chosen vocation, they come to see the portfolio as a moment in time, doing no more than capturing their openness to God’s grace to shape them for the future. No longer evidence of preparedness, but of a willingness to trust in God’s faithfulness.

The incompleteness of experience

At the heart of my understanding of the portfolio as a theological practice is a rebuttal of the idea that accounts of ministerial experience offer a complete vision in themselves of God’s intentions for candidates. I am suggesting instead that their incompleteness is what enables us to glimpse the whole – an argument I shall look at in more detail in the next section. For now, let us consider the first idea, that a portfolio is not complete in itself as an account of a trainee minister’s preparedness for public ministry.

It is perhaps helpful to contrast my argument here with an assumption that seems to have some traction in contemporary ecclesiological circles concerning the possibility of drawing straightforward conclusions from accounts of experience. Consider, for instance, the title and attendant method of the Church of England’s report into church growth, From Anecdote to Evidence, which posits a leap between accounts of the world grounded in experience and conclusions about how the world ought to be. The same belief may be taken to undergird the view of portfolios as a means of providing evidence of a ministerial candidate’s formation by reference to an account of their experiences of the practice of ministry.
The veracity of such a position has long been a subject of philosophical dispute. Consider, for example, David Hume in the eighteenth century, describing the ‘fact–value distinction’, or what has come to be known as the difference between ‘is’ and ‘ought’. Hume’s argument is that we cannot move from a description of the world as we find it to an analysis of how it ought to be, or even what it is becoming. At best we can describe what we experience now, and what we have experienced in the past. The future is beyond us.

Michael Banner makes a similar point when he writes with characteristic verve about approaches to Christian ethics that are grounded in observation of the world:

[W]hen the self-professed Christian ethicist who has learnt his ethics from the world returns to the world from writing his most recent book or paper on some aspect of Christian ethics, he finds to his great satisfaction that he can congratulate himself and his colleagues on the quite remarkable influence they have exerted over contemporary life and thought, quite oblivious to the fact that the world’s agreement with him is in reality founded on his agreement with the world.

The point is plain: if we treat our experience as the sole repository of knowledge – about ourselves, our preparedness to respond to God’s call, the world, or whatever – we are likely to become stuck in the sort of feedback loop Banner imagines. We will do no more than reaffirm what we think we know.

If, for example, an outcome of ministerial formation is broadly construed as an ‘ability to lead worship well’, it should come as no surprise that ministerial candidates will seek to demonstrate such ability in their portfolios, believing this to be a mark of their ministerial formation. Thus, it becomes accepted evidence of ministerial formation, since the churches wouldn’t ask for it if they didn’t view it in such a way. But being formed by worship is about more than becoming competent at leading, or even participating, in it. Perhaps more than any other activity, worship reveals the extent to which human beings simply aren’t reducible to a generalized set of learning outcomes or competencies, since worship reminds us not only of our particularity, but that this is precisely how God longs for us to be: particular, not general. As Rowan Williams has written, any attempt, even unintentional, to denigrate particularity is an affront to the Creator, a ‘smudge across [his] revealed face’.

Thus, a ministerial trainee’s portfolio is not in itself evidence of formation. Precisely because it seeks to express formation by reference to generalized criteria, it does not contain the whole story of their becoming in Christ. Our knowledge of such things simply doesn’t work like that.

**A theology of ‘gesture’**

To put the point differently: the composition of a portfolio is a practice, and a theological one at that. Like all practices, it carries meaning.
meaning with which such a practice is bound up is a theology of personhood, in all its provisionality and complexity, which does not permit reductive accounts of formation.

What is needed, then, is a different means of conceptualizing the practice of portfolio composition, which does better justice to its theological character. I suggest that such a means may be available in the philosophical language of ‘gesture’, which refers to actions that are of their essence partial and incomplete, but have the potential to reveal something of the whole through their very incompleteness.

A particularly eloquent account of ‘gestures’ is provided by Giovanni Maddalena in his book The Philosophy of Gesture. Of particular interest for my purposes is his notion of ‘complete gestures’. These may be compared to Maddalena’s general definition of ‘gesture’ as ‘any performed act with a beginning and an end that carries meaning’. Complete gestures, he says, do more than this: they carry a general meaning, which is to say that they tell us something general about the world in and through relation to a particular – or, in his words, ‘singular’ – object, such as a place or person, in which or by whom the action is performed. Such ‘gestures’ express ‘different possibilities of forms and feelings’, he writes, meaning that they are both specific and general, particular and universal, of the now and of the not yet that is our future.

Maddalena offers religious liturgies and creative acts of the imagination as ‘clear examples of complete gestures’, because they are ‘public and private actions that establish an identity’. It may be said, then, that when a person sits down to produce an account of their preparedness for a role that specifically involves leading liturgical acts, such as that of public minister in a Christian denomination, the action bears all the hallmarks of the sort of gesture Maddalena has in mind.

Maddalena goes on to write of the ‘teleology [that is] profoundly implied’ in his understanding of a ‘complete gesture’ and, later, of the need to embody ‘the vague universal of experience that we want to embody by selecting a particular aspect of it’ in our actions. This speaks of the relation between the particular and the general, of the fragments and the whole, that I have been mapping above, and to which theological discourses are intrinsically attuned (consider St Paul’s famous meditation in 1 Corinthians 13.12ff. as a case in point).

So it is that we reach a means of conceptualizing the practice of portfolio writing that draws on the philosophical idea of ‘gesture’ as a means of understanding our participation in the life of a God who calls us to a future that we apprehend only fleetingly, in and through the specificity of our experience. We gesture, and then we know, partly. Then we gesture again – which is the very heart of our formation as Christ’s disciples.

Getting time in proper perspective

The portfolio as gesture involves a movement between the past and the future, mediated by the present. Or, to put it differently, it is a movement through which,
fleetingly, time collapses. Consider, by way of explanation, a point made by Barth in his commentary on Romans:

We have not been searching out hidden things for the mere joy of so doing. It has not been abstract thought which has led us again and again to the point which is beyond our observation, to the light which no man can attain. Rome in the first century, all places at all times, in fact, the whole concrete situation – this has always been our starting point. In following the road of thought, this it is which has caused us to enter dark recesses. The need of making decisions of will, the need for action, the world as it is – this it is which has compelled us to consider what the world is, how we are to live in it, and what we are to do in it. We have found the world one great, unsolved enigma; an enigma to which Christ, the mercy of God, provides the answer.17

The world as we find it (or, we might say, ‘ourselves as we experience ourselves’) is our only means of apprehending – or receiving – what Barth terms ‘Christ, God’s mercy’. In this we see the sublime paradox that is at the heart of our existence as God’s creatures: between knowing and unknowing, salvation and loss, heaven and earth, God and man – who we are and who we are becoming.

In surveying their journey of formation to this moment of portfolio composition, trainees hold memories in tension with their becoming, as public ministers in Christ’s Church and as his disciples. Their gesture is both backward-looking and forward-facing, caught between the now and not yet of the kingdom. It is always provisional and temporal, even while it gestures towards that which is lasting and eternal.

**Concluding remarks: a representative gesture**

As well as furnishing a richer account of the ministerial trainee’s portfolio as a theological practice, the language of gesture participates in a richer account of personhood in general. Composition of such a portfolio, then, is construed as a profoundly ministerial task, insofar as it is a representative action. Through it, the trainee models that feature of existence in which we all participate, of reaching back to our past even as we make ready for the future that God promises us.

The gesture of portfolio composition is performed both for the self who composes, and for all selves, everywhere. It gestures beyond itself precisely because it is an account of creaturely existence (a creature’s existence), glimpsed dimly through the lens of how that person is being shaped for the past, present and future. It is therefore representative, as all public ministry ought to be: what is contained within a portfolio (even as it spills over and exceeds itself) is the candidate’s gesture from their incompleteness to God’s wholeness, thereby revealing the structure of creaturely existence. In doing so, it maps a story not just of one person’s formation, but of what it is to live in this world as it is, an enigma to which Christ alone provides the answer.
Notes

1. Pseudonyms are used to disguise the identity of candidates mentioned in practical examples.
2. Samuel Wells, *God’s Companions: reimagining Christian ethics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), especially 1ff.
3. Samuel Wells, *A Nazareth Manifesto* (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2015), 14ff.
4. Cf. George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: religion and theology in a postliberal age* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1984).
5. Church Commissioners of England, *From Anecdote to Evidence* (London: Church Growth Research, 2014) <www.churchofengland.org/more/church-resources/church-growth-research-programme/anecdote-evidence> (accessed 8 October 2020).
6. Especially Book III, Part I and II in David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1738), published in Louis P. Pojman (ed.), *Ethical Theory: classical and contemporary readings* (London: Thomson, 1998), pp. 455–66.
7. Michael Banner, *Christian Ethics and Contemporary Moral Problems* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 15.
8. Consider, for example, the criteria against which Church of England clergy are measured at the moment of ordination to the diaconate, especially Criterion C ‘Spirituality and Worship’; see <www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2017-10/formation_criteria_for_ordained_ministry.pdf> (accessed 16 April 2021). Similar criteria are found in the Methodist Church’s ‘Criteria and Competencies’ for ministry, especially Criterion 9 ‘Communication’; see <www.methodist.org.uk/media/8439/competencies-8_grid.pdf> (accessed 16 April 2021).
9. Rowan Williams, ‘Catholic persons: images of holiness, a dialogue’ in Jeffrey John (ed.), *Living the Mystery: affirming Catholicism and the future of Anglicanism* (London: DLT, 1994), pp. 84–5.
10. Andrew Davison and Alison Milbank, *For the Parish: a critique of Fresh Expressions* (London: SCM Press, 2010), p. 17.
11. Giovanni Maddalena, *The Philosophy of Gesture: completing pragmatists’ incomplete revolution* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2015).
12. Maddalena, *The Philosophy of Gesture*, p. 69.
13. Maddalena, *The Philosophy of Gesture*, pp. 70ff.
14. Maddalena, *The Philosophy of Gesture*, p. 72.
15. Maddalena, *The Philosophy of Gesture*, p. 73.
16. Maddalena, *The Philosophy of Gesture*, p. 74.
17. Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, translated by Edwin C. Hoskyns (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933), p. 427, emphasis added.

Author biography

**Revd Dr Tim Gibson** is Deputy Head of the School of Creative and Cultural Industries at UWE Bristol and a training incumbent in the Diocese of Bath and Wells. He was formerly Director of Reader Training at the South West Ministry Training Course and Director of Studies at STETS (now Sarum College).