In the theological field education, brings ministry and offers fresh ideas that will challenge and transform your ministerial practice whether you are a student, novice, or veteran. The strength of this book is the diversity of viewpoints woven throughout the book, providing a commitment to reflecting on how God calls forth creativity in ministry through collaborative intentionality. The authors speak from experience, dishing up practical case studies and personal examples that ignite insights and tools for understanding ministry in this new world.

William M. Kondrat, William Lawrence Professor of Pastoral Theology and Director of the Center for Intentional Ministry at Fuller Theological Seminary, in his book "God's Tapestry: Understanding and Celebrating Diversity".

Matthew Floden is Director of Formation for Ministry and Associate Professor of Christian Ministry at Western Theological Seminary in Holland, Michigan. He has previously served as pastor and college chaplain and is a minister of Word and Sacrament in the Reformed Church in America. He has also worked with congregations and theological schools in the U.S. and Canada to enhance field education experiences. He currently serves as chair of the Association for Theological Field Education.
Considerations for Cross-Cultural Placement

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Field education—the “Final Frontier” . . . Well, not exactly! For some students, field studies or supervised ministry or ministry in context, however named, can seem as though it is such. There is a sense of traveling to a galaxy far, far away—entry into an unfamiliar culture with unknown language, customs, food, attire, art, history, sacred expressions, perhaps even an unknown God. What an adventure!

There are a multitude of lenses through which to view an unfamiliar culture. The four most commonly named are race, gender, ethnicity, and language. Students often enter a new context focusing primarily on The Other—often discounting the particularities and cultural formations of their own lives. Students come to field education shaped by countless cultural components and innumerable experiences, both tiny and huge. If you are entering a new field education setting, your ability to articulate your own uniqueness and particularities will help you appreciate, minister to, and understand those with whom you serve, as you seek to honor universal human experiences mediated by your own individual distinctiveness, including race, gender, ethnicity, and language.

We are inclined to consider race, gender, ethnicity, and language as the only important elements in our own formation, but countless
other components contribute to individual uniqueness and vision of the world. Age, skin color, physical ability, height, weight, education, marital status, nationality, adoption, military experience, economic status, geographic location, religion, birth order, sexual orientation, worship experiences, extended family, political persuasion—all of these are relevant, and the list goes on.

Given such an open-ended list of factors that form us, how then, do we live and minister with one another, honoring our own God-given creatureliness as we meet others in a new and unfamiliar setting? How do we grow into competent leaders able to minister with agility and humility across the diverse cultures and contexts in which we find ourselves? What capacities do we need to develop and what attributes do we need to nurture for ministry and leadership in the church and world?

Sacred texts offer wisdom and guidance for the challenging questions of cross-cultural engagement. One helpful framework is found in Rom. 12:1-3:

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect. For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned.

Themes from this text can assist us in engaging in a new cultural context: nonconformity, transformation, and sober judgment.

Do Not Be Conformed

"Do not be conformed to this world," Paul writes. Do not sustain and maintain the customary patterns and behaviors of the world that demean human beings. Whether customary patterns and behaviors explicitly reinforce ways people are demeaned according to race, gender, language, or ethnicity, or whether these patterns and behaviors operate more subtly, devaluing others based on marital status, physical ability, or education, and so on, we are continually called to challenge ourselves to look, love, and live beyond incomplete descriptions of The Other. This challenge does not call us to ignore cultural differences but to live in community with the tension of various personal distinctions.

The nonconformity of which the apostle Paul speaks is an expression of God’s grace in the structuring of human relationships. Restructuring of human relationships can be tricky as we enter new cultural contexts. In general, our tendency is to interact with others based on one of two polarities. We may be tempted to use our own experiences and understandings as the criteria to which others should conform, viewing the new context through our own lenses without questions or critical reflection, assuming our experience is normative, perhaps even God-ordained. Or we may be tempted to conform to the norms of the new cultural context, dismissing without questions or critical reflection the validity of our own experiences, viewing a new cultural context as normative—superior to our own and, yes, perhaps even God-ordained.

The supervisor-mentor is an important resource in navigating this unknown territory. She or he models appropriate ministry for the context and assists in examining the similarities and differences between your own context and the unfamiliar environment. Together, supervisor-mentor and intern explore implications for the practice of ministry and operating from one context or the other—or from a courageous and creative intersection of these two contexts.

Be Transformed

The continuing transformation of the people of God requires far more than a tweaking of externals—wearing Afrocentric clothing in February to celebrate Black History Month or putting on a clerical collar. Transformation is complete change—metamorphosis.
It is authentically appropriating new ideas and attitudes that give the experience of self and others greater depth and sophistication. Transformation moves us beyond how we once understood and experienced ourselves into a “new creation” (2 Cor. 5:17).

Transformation doesn’t just fall on us like manna from heaven. As biblical scholar Thomas L. Hoyt Jr. reminds us, “This transformation is not a one-time event but a constant struggle.” It is based on commitment to the renewing of one’s mind, requiring engagement with consistent, critical theological reflection. Such reflection pays careful attention to ways that biblical texts relate to the rituals and practices of a faith community. It urges full engagement with supervisors and lay teams, listening to their experiences, sharing our own, humbly questioning both as we allow God to speak through Scripture, tradition, and experience. It requires courage to look deeply into oneself and one’s own cultural context and assumptions as we offer our lives to be shaped by grace rather than the world.

**Exercise Sober Judgment**

As field studies students and future ministerial leaders, exploring our self-understanding in our particular context is critical. Paul urges us not to think too highly of ourselves (and I would add, too lowly) but to think about ourselves with sober judgment. Sober judgment is thoughtful and discerning. Acquiring such judgment often involves significant sacrifice. This kind of knowing requires rugged honesty with oneself and with others. It raises the question of how honest I want to be with myself, and how honest I dare to be with others. Addressing these questions is not for the faint of heart.

Eric Law, Episcopal priest, author, and founding director of Kaleidoscope Institute, defines self-awareness as a “deep understanding of one’s cultural values, strengths and weaknesses, and privileges and power that come with one’s roles and cultural background.” Self-awareness is more than simply identifying the various cultural components that make up identity. Sober judgment is questioning, exploring, digging deep to understand how those components influence our way of experiencing the world. As we continue the journey into self-awareness, honoring the complexity of our own lives, we become better able to honor the complexities of another’s life, appreciating differences as opportunities, rather than problems.

As we are better able to articulate our own strengths and weaknesses, we can more fully accept the strengths and weaknesses of others.

**Reflecting on Cross-Cultural Relationships**

In the broader U.S. culture, race, gender, ethnicity, and language are often perceived as the only obstacles or challenges to cross-cultural relationships. However, as the following brief study will show, cross-cultural relationships can be hindered by more subtle cultural components.

Two students, Andrew and Amy, were both placed at the same church for their year of supervised ministry. This church was located in a neighborhood different from where either one of them had worshiped or served. Both students had earned master's degrees in other helping professions and were employed in positions of responsibility prior to entering the Master of Divinity program. The two students had a common denominational affiliation and had served in various capacities in their home congregations. Both home congregations were grounded in a black church tradition valuing vibrant, enthusiastic, call-and-response worship, complete with gospel choirs and artful oratory. Leadership was strongly focused on the pastor.

A contextual nuance peculiar to Chicago reflects migration patterns of African Americans within the city and differences between Southsiders and Westsiders. Both students were Westsiders; the field site congregation was South Side. Colloquially speaking, Southsiders refer to Westsiders as “ghetto,” as a way of delineating differing strata of class, education, and economic status.

The church where Andrew and Amy were placed for their year of field studies also belonged to the same denomination as their home congregation. However, the field site was quite different from
what either had experienced previously. The worship music of this church tended to be classical, using hymns and anthems rather than gospel music or choruses. The worship setting was much quieter, with less call and response. Lay leaders participated in worship to a greater degree than either student had previously experienced. The pastor preached from the Revised Common Lectionary, and the worship services reflected the seasons of the liturgical year.

As part of their field studies program, Amy and Andrew were asked to reflect on what challenged them and what helped them flourish in their new context. Both Andrew and Amy were challenged by the very different style of worship. Having come from a worship style where "I got to get my praise on!" with emotive physicality of worship being the evidence of God's presence, worship at the field site initially left them cold, confused, and questioning.

**OBSERVING AND ABSORBING**

Andrew's response to the unfamiliar worship experiences led him to join the male chorus at the field site congregation. For the first time, he used sheet music, and for the first time in years he used a hymnal. In a reflection time with the field educator, he spoke about Psa. 137:4: "How could we sing the LORD's song in a foreign land?" For him, singing the Lord's song in a strange land wasn't geographical but rather theological and experiential.

In time, Andrew recognized that his struggles originated not so much from the field site as from inside himself. "I rushed into judgment before I observed or absorbed" the genuine worship at the field site, he said. He assumed that quieter worship services only happened in white churches and struggled to see how worshipers at his field site were as involved as worshipers in his home church. Andrew named his stereotyping behavior and judgment as coming from his own fear—fear of leaving the congregation where he was raised; fear about whether his gifts and talents would be received; fear of being the outsider and wondering how to fit in to the unfamiliar context.

Another dissimilarity for Andrew was the way titles were understood. After fifteen years of ministry in another congregation where he was called "Reverend" even though he was not ordained, Andrew found himself being called "Minister Andrew" in a congregation that understood titles and ordination differently. At first, to be called "minister" instead of "reverend" felt like a demotion. But as Andrew persevered in his new context, he began to understand and accept the different understanding of titles.

Even in the midst of these differences and challenges, Andrew was thriving. He credited his ability to flourish in this ministry setting, first, to his relationship with his supervisor-mentor, and second, to his relationship with the congregation and their support of not only his ministry but also his wife and children.

In the supervisory relationship, Andrew found a safe place to question his occasional biased experience. "I expect this kind of worship in a white church, not a black church." His supervisor responded openly and without defensiveness, sharing his own life and ministry; the reasons for use of the Revised Common Lectionary and observations of the liturgical calendar.

Andrew identified his relationship with his supervisor-mentor as a primary instrument of his flourishing and learning. In the hospitality of those reflection times, he was able to find a place to "block out differences and listen to the similarities." He began to be intentional about embracing changes that he experienced in worship and to see that "the people were into what they were doing—genuine worship." Andrew was even able to see that the congregation included some folks who "worship like me." He was able to name and honor both experiences, observing, "I like to say I come from a traditional black Baptist church but this church is traditional, too!"

The congregation's care was the other component in Andrew's flourishing. Members invested in Andrew's learning and development and in his wife, Jenna, and their children. Perhaps their most influential, generous act of caring had to do with Andrew's spouse. Jenna had responded to God's call to ordained ministry and entered seminary, but in Andrew's home congregation, women in ministry
were not supported, and he knew it was only a matter of time until he would have to leave his home congregation for good. This field site congregation embraced Jenna’s call and took her under their care—the first woman this congregation has formally supported in the journey toward ordained ministry.

In other reflections, Andrew offered the following advice to students entering the field studies experience, especially those who find themselves in sites that they expect to be familiar:

Learn to live with ambiguities and questions.
Know that God is big—huge.
Be grateful for the opportunity to encounter God.
Put yourself out—don’t resist change.
Be willing to learn the deeper culture, hidden beyond what is seen and heard.

REEVALUATING IDENTITY

Amy, as Andrew, also experienced the challenge of a “more mainstream worship style” at the field site congregation. This was heightened due to how she apprehended the church’s perception of class and educational differences and people “coming from the right family.” As the first one in her working class family to graduate from college, successfully complete one master’s degree, and now pursue a second, Amy initially had difficulty navigating what she perceived as elitism. She struggled with a sense that the worship style of the field site was better than that of her home congregation. This was directly connected to her fear of leaving her home congregation because of both the comfort she found in the worship experience’s familiarity and the fact that she shared it with her family. Amy’s education and professional accomplishments had already set her apart from others in her family system, and this would be yet another experience that would emphasize the increasing differences.

The challenges Amy experienced were rooted in her sense of identity as one shaped and formed by what she understood as the “traditional” black church. This experience called her to reevaluate her identity, her role in her family, and God’s purpose for her life. In the midst of these challenges, Amy named the congregation as an important factor in her flourishing. Through her relationships with members of the congregation, she began to see evidence of her own growth, changes, even transformations. Through the struggle of comparing the field site worship style with her preferred and familiar style, she was able to see a “lot of paradigm shifts,” not the least of which was the realization that “God can be in more than one context” and that she was “able to see God” in both.

As members of the congregation shared their lives, stories, and life journeys, Amy perceived commonalities among the different expressions of worship. Music was often the “same music but sung differently” and served the same function—a way to praise and honor God. Some use anthems, others use gospel. Liturgical dance could be “ballet-ish and modern with a little hip-hop thrown in.” Amy was able to experience the worship service as having the same purpose but a different expression than what she was accustomed to. The preaching was similar, “less the call and response” but theologically deep and nurturing for the congregation. She, like Andrew, was able to see some “folks who worship like me.” Amy was grateful for what she called the “privilege” and gift of this learning experience: “I have known myself to be a change agent, and this opportunity has been to be on the other end with God being the change agent!”

MENTORING THAT CHALLENGES AND ENCOURAGES

Amy and Andrew were under the care of a seasoned supervisor who was able to facilitate growth and transformation. As he reflected on his experience with each student, he named consistent supervisory sessions as indispensable components of the learning and growing process. As supervisor, he was clear about his own style (direct) and aware of how each of the students had their own styles of reflection and their own responses to his style. The supervisor was clear that his role had multiple components. He was called to
facilitate growth and transformation by challenging their reflection, by providing opportunities for their learning and serving, and by sharing his own faith and pastoral journey. In addition, he encouraged the congregation to share their individual and collective faith journeys. This helped the students understand the context in which they found themselves, even as they found their own authentic voice. This required attention to each student’s distinctive styles and learning goals, their ability to observe and understand a context, and their experiences and exposure to varieties of intercultural experiences both within the African American community and beyond. His challenge was to discern how far to push when encountering resistance or “when there is a block.”

The supervisor responded to the students’ struggle with worship style by continuing to push them to be both observant of and open to the possibility of new ways to experience God that would allow for varieties of expression rather than just “one diet.” He encouraged them to move into this different cultural context and challenged their cultural assumptions regarding “the black church.” Both Andrew and Amy expressed appreciation that they were able to learn about their own culture and acknowledge that there is no monolithic black church but rather a broad, deep, diverse African American Christian experience.

This study illustrates how students can move away from the either-or understanding of normative experiences and embrace transformation as they continue to develop their own sober, sound judgment. Both Andrew and Amy entered the field studies experience certain that their preferred worship style was the one true worship style. How could one tell if the Spirit was present if there were no verbal responses and exultations during the worship service? At the outset, they used their own experience as the criterion for what is normative.

Through reflection with their supervisor and the larger congregation, they were able to integrate new ideas and attitudes that allowed them to perceive and appreciate diversity. Amy and Andrew engaged in consistent ministerial reflection with their supervisor and members of the congregation, and through encounters with this congregation’s understanding of God, tradition, worship, Scriptures, and leadership, they were able to hear God speaking differently. Scholar Thomas L. Hoyt Jr. says, “Paul calls for the transformation of the mind, because he knows that actions are generated by attitudes.” Andrew and Amy’s actions and acceptance of experiencing God in new ways illustrate such transformation through the renewing of the mind.

**Inner Transformation**

Another way to view this transformation process is through the insights of Carl G. Jung, who writes, “The patient must be drawn out ‘of himself’ into other paths, which is the true meaning of ‘education,’ and this can only be achieved by an educative will.” While field studies students are not patients, transformation does require that they are willing to be drawn out of themselves and into the paths of others, all the while being willing to be changed by God’s Spirit through those encounters.

Pastoral theologian Jaco Hamman writes that “knowledge rarely leads to change” and encourages us to engage relationships and experiences with compassionate curiosity and questions about ourselves. He calls us to develop capacities—a roominess that can hold the questions, the tensions, and the paradoxes that we have within us. Both Amy and Andrew, through the process of reflection and questioning, were able to create and develop a larger inner self that could hold their own sense of self, which in turn makes available greater capacities to honor others. Without their judgmental lens, both Andrew and Amy entered relationships, worship experiences, and responsibilities with greater grace and love and with more agility and freedom.

The development and acceptance of our self, our gifts and graces for ministry as well as our limitations, are critical for ministry and for exploring and celebrating one’s particular place in ministry. This requires courage to engage in ongoing self-assessment and evaluation.
and to develop relationships with peers and colleagues who will hold us accountable to ongoing self-reflection about our cultural particularities and how we affect and interact with others.

The experiences of Andrew and Amy can be a helpful guide to ongoing development and pastoral formation as it relates to ministry across diverse contexts. While actual, tangible ministry skills are necessary—listening skills, preaching, teaching, administration, worship leadership, pastoral care, and so on—a requisite would be more about attitude than aptitude, more soul-based than skill-based, more about courage than capability. For Andrew and Amy to grow, they had to engage questions about their own faith journey and the faith journeys of others. They had to develop and nurture attitudes of compassionate curiosity about themselves and the context in which they were serving and learning.

To move into the transformation stage, Amy and Andrew had to participate in new experiences. They had to evoke courage and a willingness to learn and grow; to entertain new understandings of God and God’s activity in the world. They had to offer their own bodies, minds, and souls to God as their spiritual worship, relying on God to renew their minds.

Amy and Andrew were then able to articulate their own growth—recognizing the narrowness of their experience and how their lack of exposure to wider community understandings limited their abilities. They were able to identify areas of ongoing growth as they both desired to have the necessary agility and humility to minister in whatever context God offers.

The first practical component providing such a nurturing environment was the supervisor. In this particular case, the supervisor was able to hear critique and criticism without responding defensively. He held differing viewpoints and experiences without humiliating the students. He attended respectfully to each, sensitive to their individual learning styles, yet appropriately challenged their perceptions and judgments. The supervisor was able to do this largely because he took the time to develop trust with the students early in the placement process. As a result, he was able to push and challenge; and the students knew that he had their best interests, growth, and ministry in mind.

The second critical component was the hospitality of the congregation. They understood themselves as a teaching congregation and also had the ability to hold differing experiences without defensiveness. They very clearly wanted the students to succeed, grow, and develop as mature disciples of Christ and ministers of the gospel. The congregation had an appropriate pride in the students’ accomplishments and expressed gratitude for being part of the journey.

Because supervised ministry programs are so diverse, a classroom component may or may not be connected to the experiential component. However, a peer group or ministry reflection group is often required. This is another important element of growth and development. It provides an opportunity to develop colleague relationships that will assist students in self-assessment and evaluation, and offer wisdom and questions for discernment.

The journey of cross-cultural placement requires great effort, intent, and compassion. However, as students continue to grow in self-understanding, dare to be honest about their own cultural makeup, and courageously share themselves and the lives of others with respect and care, the foundation for rewarding ministry is created.