

Beyond professionalization: Teaching as ministry in contemporary religious education

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Abstract

Contemporary faith-based education increasingly frames teaching in professional and managerial terms, often prioritizing measurable competencies and institutional outcomes. While such approaches contribute to academic accountability, they risk obscuring the theological depth of religious education as a form of ministry. This systematic-conceptual constructivist research paper argues that teaching in religious education is fundamentally vocational, grounded in a theological understanding of calling, service, and ecclesial mission. Drawing on ecclesiology, practical theology, and the theology of work, the study develops a constructive theoretical framework that reclaims the identity of the religious educator as both teacher and minister. Through a critical engagement with key ecclesial texts and contemporary educational discourse, the paper examines the tensions religious educators experience between institutional demands and their sense of vocation. It proposes a vocational model of religious education that integrates pedagogy, spirituality, and formative presence, emphasizing teaching as a lived response to God's call rather than a purely technical function. By articulating teaching as ministry, this conceptual study contributes to ongoing discussions on teacher formation, mission integrity, and faith identity in Catholic and other faith-based educational institutions. The paper offers theological and pedagogical insights for reimagining educator formation programs and institutional cultures that sustain the vocational and ministerial dimensions of religious education in pluralistic and increasingly secularized contexts.

Keywords: professionalization, teaching, contemporary, ministry, religious education

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1. Introduction

Across contemporary educational landscapes, faith-based institutions increasingly find themselves navigating systems governed by professionalization, accountability, and performance metrics. Teaching is now frequently framed in terms of standards, competencies, and measurable outcomes, reflecting broader neoliberal reforms that privilege efficiency and comparability (Ball, 2017). While these mechanisms are often justified in the name of quality assurance, they tend to reshape education into a technical enterprise, narrowing its scope and flattening its moral and relational dimensions. In such contexts, the deeper purposes of education which are integral formation, meaning-making, and human flourishing are easily displaced by procedural concerns (Biesta, 2022).

For Catholic and other faith-based schools, this shift is not merely administrative but theological. Their educational mission has historically rested on a vision of formation that integrates intellectual development with moral, spiritual, and communal growth. Yet scholars such as Grace (2019) and Fancourt (2022) have observed that market-driven logics increasingly permeate the governance and culture of Catholic education, subtly reconfiguring teacher identity and institutional priorities. Educators often find themselves caught between fidelity to mission and compliance with systems that measure success almost exclusively through performance indicators.

Nowhere is this tension more evident than in religious education. Traditionally understood as a formative and ecclesial practice, religious education participates in the Church's broader mission of dialogue, evangelization, and integral human development. The Congregation for Catholic Education (2022) reiterates this vision, presenting the Catholic school as a space where faith, culture, and life are brought into meaningful conversation. Yet within everyday institutional discourse, religious educators are increasingly described in functional terms such as the mere implementers of curricula, facilitators of competencies, or assessors of learning, leaving little room for the language of vocation, ministry, or spiritual accompaniment.

Such a narrowing of vision risks obscuring the theological identity of the religious educator. This paper contends that teaching in religious education cannot be adequately understood apart from vocation. To teach religion is not simply to perform a specialized task but to respond to a calling that situates pedagogy within service, witness, and accompaniment. Reclaiming teaching as ministry does not diminish professional rigor; rather, it reorders professional competence within a richer theological horizon. From this perspective, pedagogy becomes an expression of **diakonia** and **martyria**, oriented toward the holistic formation of persons rather than the efficient delivery of content (Groome, 2021).

The study proceeds as a **conceptual and theoretical–constructive inquiry**. Rather than offering empirical analysis, it undertakes systematic theological reflection through sustained engagement with ecclesial documents, contemporary theological scholarship, and critical educational theory. In line with developments in practical theology, teaching is treated here as a locus of lived theology; a practice, as Cahalan and Mikoski (2014) argued, through which theological meaning is embodied, contested, and rearticulated. This approach allows the paper to interrogate dominant educational paradigms while constructing an alternative account rooted in vocation and ministry.

The contribution of this inquiry lies in its implications for the future of religious education in faith-based institutions. In educational environments marked by secularization, pluralism, and instrumental rationality, reclaiming teaching as ministry offers a way of sustaining mission integrity without retreating from contemporary realities (Francis, 2020; Fincham, 2025). By clarifying the conceptual foundations of vocation in teaching, this paper seeks to support educators and institutions in articulating a vision of religious education that

remains intellectually credible, professionally responsible, and theologically faithful.

2. Methodology

This paper employs a **conceptual and theoretical–constructive methodology**, appropriate for theological research that seeks to clarify concepts, articulate normative claims, and develop coherent interpretive frameworks rather than to generate empirical data. Conceptual theological inquiry proceeds through critical engagement with theological texts, ecclesial teaching, and reflective accounts of practice, treating these sources as loci for theological meaning-making rather than objects of measurement. Such an approach is well established within contemporary practical theology, which understands theology as a discipline concerned with interpretation, normativity, and constructive articulation (Dunlop, 2021).

Methodologically, the study undertakes a sustained and dialogical reading of selected ecclesial documents on Catholic education alongside recent peer-reviewed theological scholarship. This dialogical process reflects approaches in practical theology that emphasize theological reflection as a structured movement between tradition, context, and praxis, allowing concepts such as vocation and ministry to be critically examined and normatively rearticulated (Schoeman, 2022). Rather than offering sociological critique or policy evaluation, the analysis remains internal to theological discourse, focusing on conceptual coherence, theological meaning, and normative orientation.

The constructive dimension of the methodology involves proposing a theological framework that reclaims teaching as ministry within faith-based education. This aligns with contemporary constructive theological approaches that seek to generate new conceptual syntheses responsive to present educational and ecclesial challenges while remaining rooted in theological tradition. By engaging recent theological reflection on Catholic educational leadership and mission, the study advances a conceptual model intended to inform educator formation, institutional self-understanding, and further empirical research (Fincham, 2025; Francis, 2020).

3. Teaching within Contemporary Educational Paradigms

Contemporary educational systems are increasingly structured by accountability regimes, performance measurement, and policy-driven standardization. Large-scale assessments and test-based accountability frameworks now shape how teaching quality is defined and evaluated, often privileging comparability, efficiency, and governance over pedagogical judgment and formative aims (Vergier et al., 2018). Within these paradigms, teaching is frequently construed as a technical activity oriented toward demonstrable outcomes, narrowing the space for relational, ethical, and meaning-centered dimensions of educational practice.

Research on accountability reforms indicates that such paradigms significantly reshape teacher identity and professional self-understanding. Camphuijsen and Parcerisa (2022) observed that teachers working under test-based accountability regimes often experience heightened pressure to align their practice with externally imposed indicators, even when these indicators conflict with their pedagogical or moral commitments. As a result, teaching risks being reduced to compliance with policy expectations rather than understood as a relational and formative practice. This shift has profound implications for educators whose work is rooted in values, interpretation, and ethical discernment rather than measurable performance alone.

For religious educators, these developments pose distinctive challenges. Religious education is concerned with questions of meaning, transcendence, and moral orientation; these are dimensions of learning that resist standardization and quantification. Fancourt (2022) noted that studies in religious education have shown that policy-driven frameworks often inadequately capture the aims of religious learning, resulting in a disjunction between assessment practices, and the formative goals of faith-based education. Within such contexts, religious educators are required to navigate competing expectations between secular educational accountability and faith-informed pedagogical commitments.

Catholic educational institutions articulate their mission in terms of integral human formation, dialogue between faith and culture, and the cultivation of Christian values. The Church emphasizes that Catholic schools are not merely instructional spaces but communities of formation oriented toward dialogue, accompaniment, and the holistic development of persons (Congregation for Catholic Education, 2022). Yet empirical and conceptual studies, for Fincham (2025), suggest that Catholic schools are increasingly shaped by the same policy logics that govern secular institutions, creating tensions between mission-driven education and managerial governance.

These tensions extend beyond institutional structures to the lived experience of educators. When teaching is framed primarily through instrumental and performative lenses, the vocational and ministerial dimensions of religious education risk being marginalized. Research on Catholic educational leadership highlights how sustained exposure to secular accountability regimes can contribute to mission drift and vocational fragmentation, particularly when educators lack theological resources to articulate the distinctiveness of their work (Fincham, 2025). In this context, teaching is experienced less as a response to vocation and more as an administratively regulated function.

A critical engagement with contemporary educational paradigms thus reveals that the challenge facing religious education is not only external secularization but the internalization of instrumental rationalities that reshape how teaching itself is imagined and practiced. Addressing this challenge requires more than pedagogical adjustment or policy negotiation; it calls for a theological rearticulation of teaching that resists reductive paradigms and reclaims educator identity within a horizon of vocation, ministry, and formation. Such a rearticulation provides the necessary groundwork for understanding teaching in religious education as a ministerial practice rather than a merely technical role.

4. Theological Foundations of Teaching as Vocation

Within Christian theology, vocation signifies a fundamental orientation of life as response rather than function. Lovell's (2024). theological reflection emphasizes vocation as relational and participatory, grounded in divine initiative and discerned within concrete practices and communities. Vocation is therefore not reducible to personal fulfillment or professional designation but names a form of responsiveness shaped by responsibility toward others and openness to transcendence (Emelu, 2024). Such an understanding resists instrumental accounts of work by situating human activity within horizons of gift, service, and hope.

Catholic theology has consistently identified education as a privileged locus of vocation because of its formative influence on persons and communities. Teaching participates in the Church's mission not only through explicit religious instruction but through the shaping of moral imagination, social responsibility, and openness to meaning. The Church's ecclesial teaching reiterates that Catholic schools are spaces of formation and dialogue rather than merely sites of instructional delivery (Congregation for Catholic Education, 2022). Within this vision, the educator's vocation is inseparable from the Church's commitment to integral human development.

Ecclesiological developments further support an understanding of teaching as ministry. Contemporary theology increasingly recognizes ministry as a shared and differentiated participation in the Church's mission rather than an activity restricted to ordained roles. Groome (2021) believes that religious education exemplifies this form of lay ministry because it mediates faith primarily through pedagogical relationships and formative presence. Teaching thus embodies **diakonia** through service to learners and **martyria** through ethical and intellectual witness.

A vocational theology of teaching is also grounded in theological anthropology. Christian anthropology affirms the human person as created for relationality, responsibility, and growth toward fullness of life. Education, from this standpoint, is never morally neutral but always shapes moral imagination and social orientation. Teaching as vocation therefore entails accompaniment, understood as attentive presence to learners as they interpret experience and discern values in complex contexts (Rothgangel, 2022).

Theological reflection must also reckon with the pressures exerted by contemporary educational cultures shaped by accountability and instrumental rationality. Research on test-based and performance-driven regimes demonstrates how such frameworks constrain teachers' moral agency and professional judgment (Camphuijsen & Parcerisa, 2023). For religious educators, these conditions can obscure the vocational meaning of teaching by reframing education as compliance with systems that inadequately account for formative and spiritual aims.

Fincham (2025) highlights how these pressures affect institutional mission and educator identity. When managerial logics dominate school culture, vocation risks becoming privatized rather than publicly affirmed within institutional life. Studies of Catholic school leadership suggest that reclaiming vocation is essential for resisting mission drift and sustaining formation-centered educational practices. Vocation thus functions as a critical theological category that challenges reductionist understandings of teaching.

In this regard, these theological foundations support a constructive understanding of teaching as ministry rooted in vocation. Teaching in religious education emerges as a lived response to divine calling, enacted through service, witness, and accompaniment within concrete educational contexts. By articulating teaching as vocation, this paper advances a theological framework that affirms professional competence while situating it within a richer horizon of meaning. Such a framework offers resources for reimagining religious educator identity, formation, and praxis amid the pressures of secularization, pluralism, and educational instrumentalization (Pollefeyt and Richards, 2020).

5. Teaching as Ministry: A Constructive Theological Framework

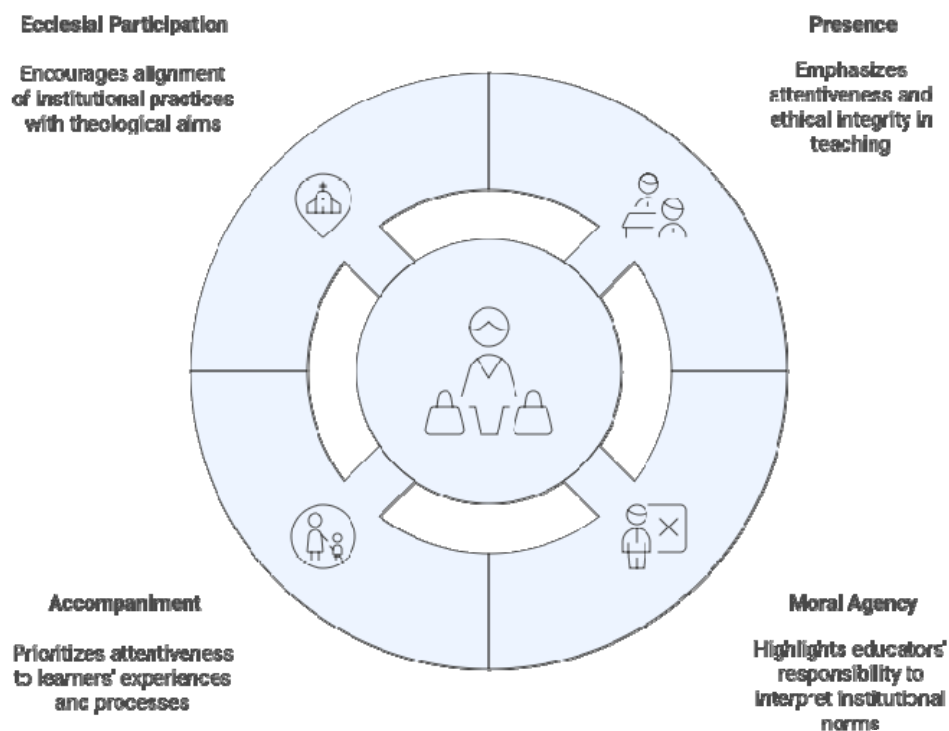
Teaching as ministry can only be adequately articulated when pedagogy is understood as a theological practice rather than a neutral or purely technical activity. Contemporary practical theology increasingly recognizes everyday professional practices as loci of theological meaning, where faith is interpreted and embodied through action (Osmer, 2008). Within religious education, teaching functions as a site where theological commitments are enacted through relational engagement, moral discernment, and interpretive guidance. This perspective shifts the focus from teaching as delivery of content to teaching as participation in the formative and reconciling work of God within educational contexts.

A constructive framework for teaching as ministry must therefore begin with an expanded understanding of ministry itself. Gaillardetz and Hahnenberg (2015) study in recent developments in Catholic ecclesiology emphasize that ministry is grounded in baptism and shared across diverse vocations rather than confined to ordained roles. Within this ecclesial horizon, religious educators participate in the Church's mission through pedagogical service that forms conscience, cultivates dialogue, and nurtures ethical responsibility. Teaching thus emerges as a genuinely ministerial practice insofar as it contributes to the Church's formative presence in the world.

Central to this ministerial account is the notion of **presence** as a theological and pedagogical category. Topliss (2023) argued that teaching as ministry is expressed not only through curricular competence but through sustained attentiveness to learners as persons situated within complex social and moral contexts. Studies in religious education and pastoral practice highlight how educators exercise formative influence through availability, consistency, and ethical integrity rather than instructional authority alone. Such presence mediates trust and meaning, enabling the classroom to function as a space of encounter rather than mere instruction.

This framework also reconfigures the nature of authority in religious education. Rather than deriving authority primarily from institutional position or assessment regimes, teaching as ministry understands authority as relational and dialogical. Educational accountability systems increasingly privilege compliance and performance metrics, often constraining teachers' professional judgment (Camphuijsen & Parcerisa, 2022; Verger et al., 2018). In contrast, a ministerial understanding of authority emphasizes credibility, interpretive responsibility, and responsiveness to learners, aligning pedagogical leadership with ethical and theological discernment rather than managerial control.

Illustration 1: Teaching as Ministry Framework



Source: The Illustration was made using Napkin.AI

A further dimension of teaching as ministry is the recognition of educators as **moral agents** operating within institutional structures. Keenan (2024) contested that theological ethics affirms that moral agency is not exercised solely by individuals but also shaped and constrained by collective and organizational contexts. Religious educators negotiate institutional demands, curricular expectations, and accountability pressures that can either enable or inhibit ministerial integrity. Understanding teaching as ministry therefore entails affirming educators' responsibility to interpret institutional norms in light of formative and theological commitments.

This emphasis on moral agency becomes particularly significant in pluralistic educational environments. Research in religious pedagogy demonstrates that educators frequently mediate between diverse belief systems, cultural expectations, and institutional identities (Anthony & Lourdunathan, 2025). Teaching as ministry in such contexts requires dialogical competence and ethical sensitivity rather than confessional imposition. Ministerial pedagogy thus involves fostering spaces of respectful engagement where meaning is explored through dialogue, accompaniment, and critical reflection.

The concept of **accompaniment** further deepens this constructive framework. Contemporary theological and educational scholarship highlights accompaniment as a mode of formative engagement that honors learners' agency and developmental trajectories. Rather than instrumentalizing education toward predetermined outcomes, accompaniment prioritizes attentiveness to learners' lived experiences and interpretive processes (Pollefeyt & Richards, 2020). In religious education, teaching as ministry is enacted through walking with learners as they negotiate questions of meaning, identity, and responsibility within complex social realities.

Institutionally, this framework challenges faith-based schools to reconsider how educator identity is articulated and supported. Empirical studies of Catholic education indicate that when ministerial language is absent from institutional discourse, educators experience fragmentation between professional expectations and vocational self-understanding. Teaching as ministry therefore calls institutions to align leadership practices, professional development, and evaluation frameworks with formative and theological aims rather than relying

solely on managerial criteria.

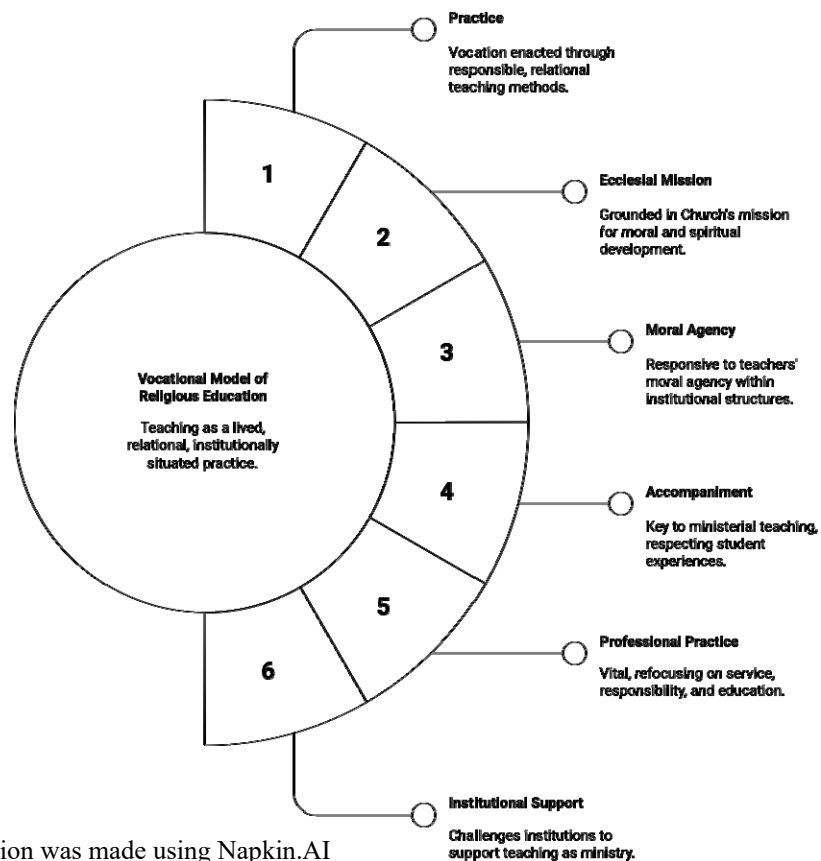
Articulating teaching as ministry does not entail rejecting professional standards or pedagogical excellence. Instead, it reorders professional competence within a theological horizon oriented toward service and formation. Catholic educational thought consistently affirms that academic rigor and spiritual purpose are not opposed but mutually reinforcing when integrated within a coherent vision of education (Groome, 2021). Teaching as ministry thus affirms professionalism while resisting its reduction to technical efficiency or performance compliance.

This constructive theological framework presents teaching in religious education as a ministerial practice characterized by presence, moral agency, accompaniment, and ecclesial participation. It offers a normative account capable of resisting instrumental educational paradigms while remaining institutionally credible and pedagogically robust. By reclaiming teaching as ministry, this framework provides conceptual resources for sustaining educator identity and mission integrity amid the pressures of secularization, pluralism, and accountability-driven reform (Fincham, 2025).

6. A Vocational Model of Religious Education

The constructive account of teaching as ministry developed in the previous section invites a more sustained articulation of how vocation operates within the concrete practice of religious education. Rather than treating vocation as an abstract theological category or a purely subjective sense of calling, this section proposes a vocational model that understands teaching as a lived, relational, and institutionally situated practice. In contemporary educational contexts shaped by performance metrics and managerial rationalities, such a model is necessary to recover the formative and ministerial depth of religious education without disengaging from professional responsibility.

Illustration 2: Dimensions of Vocational Religious Education



At the center of this vocational model is the conviction that vocation in religious education is enacted through practice rather than merely affirmed at the level of intention. Teaching becomes vocational not simply because an educator experiences a sense of calling, but because pedagogical practice itself embodies responsibility, interpretive judgment, and relational commitment. Research on professionalism in religious education highlights that vocational identity is formed through engagement with institutional contexts, professional norms, and pedagogical challenges, rather than emerging solely from personal motivation (Freathy et al., 2016). Teaching as ministry thus functions as the concrete locus where vocation takes shape in everyday educational life.

Ecclesial mission provides the theological orientation that grounds this vocational enactment. Within contemporary Catholic ecclesiology, ministry is increasingly understood as rooted in baptism and shared across diverse forms of service rather than confined to ordained roles. Religious educators participate in the Church's mission by engaging in formative practices that cultivate conscience, ethical reflection, and openness to transcendence. Teaching becomes ministerial insofar as it contributes to the Church's public and formative presence through witness and accompaniment rather than through confessional control, situating religious education within broader processes of moral and human formation.

This ecclesial grounding intensifies, rather than diminishes, the educator's responsibility within institutional life. A vocational model must therefore take seriously the moral agency of teachers who operate within structures shaped by curriculum mandates, accountability frameworks, and professional expectations. Ulbert et al. (2017) argued that studies in moral agency emphasize that responsibility is exercised within political and organizational contexts that shape what forms of action are possible and intelligible. Teaching as ministry thus involves the ongoing discernment of how institutional norms can be interpreted and enacted in ways that remain faithful to formative and theological commitments.

Such discernment becomes especially significant in pluralistic educational environments. Religious educators routinely engage learners who bring diverse religious, cultural, and moral perspectives into the classroom. Within this context, as Jackson (2019) proposes, vocation cannot be reduced to the transmission of fixed doctrinal content or the reinforcement of institutional identity alone. Instead, teaching as ministry requires dialogical competence and professional judgment, enabling educators to hold together conviction and openness. Research in religious education underscores that vocational pedagogy in plural contexts is marked by interpretive humility and attentiveness to learner perspectives rather than confessional imposition (Conroy, 2016).

The vocational model therefore foregrounds accompaniment as a defining posture of ministerial teaching. Accompaniment names a way of being-with learners that honors their experiences, questions, and developmental trajectories. Empirical studies of pastoral care and teacher practice indicate that formative influence is exercised less through authoritative instruction and more through presence, consistency, and ethical reliability (Topliss, 2023). Within religious education, this posture allows teaching to function as a space of encounter where meaning can be explored through dialogue and reflection rather than enforced consensus.

Professional practice remains an essential dimension of the vocational model, encompassing pedagogy, curriculum design, assessment, and accountability. However, the model resists the tendency to treat professional competence as an end in itself. Scholarship on teacher professionalization in religious education cautions that when professionalism is framed primarily in performative or managerial terms, it risks as Tuna (2021) observed, marginalizing the formative and ethical dimensions of teaching. By situating professional practice within a vocational horizon, the model affirms rigor and expertise while reorienting them toward service, responsibility, and formation.

Crucially, vocation in this model is not confined to moments of explicit religious instruction or overt theological discourse. Drawing on practical theology, vocation is understood as lived theology where faith is embodied through action, relationship, and interpretive discernment within ordinary professional practices

(Schipani, 2022). Teaching as ministry thus unfolds not only in what is taught, but in how educators listen, respond, and accompany learners within the rhythms of institutional life.

Institutionally, the vocational model challenges faith-based schools to reflect critically on how educator identity is named and supported. Research on teacher subcultures in Catholic education suggests that when institutional discourse emphasizes compliance and performance without articulating formative and ministerial purposes, educators may experience fragmentation between professional expectations and vocational self-understanding (Hyde & Anning, 2024). A vocational framework calls institutions to align leadership practices, formation programs, and evaluation systems with their educational mission, creating conditions in which teaching as ministry can be sustained rather than sidelined.

Nevertheless, this vocational model offers a coherent and constructive vision of religious education as a ministerial practice embedded within contemporary educational realities. It neither withdraws from professional accountability nor capitulates to instrumental rationalities. Instead, it proposes a way of holding together ecclesial mission, moral agency, accompaniment, and professional practice within a unified theological horizon. By articulating vocation as a lived and public practice, the model deepens the claim that teaching in religious education is not merely a profession, but a form of ministry that remains both theologically faithful and educationally credible in pluralistic contexts.

7. Implications for Educator Formation and Institutional Culture

Reconceiving teaching as a form of ministry reshapes the foundational assumptions that guide educator formation in faith-based institutions. When teaching is understood only as a technical profession, formation tends to prioritize procedural competence and compliance with external standards. A ministerial understanding, however, reframes formation as an ongoing process of becoming; one that integrates professional expertise with moral responsibility, relational attentiveness, and theological reflection. This shift foregrounds the formative character of education itself and places questions of meaning and purpose at the center of educator preparation.

At the level of initial formation, this perspective challenges programs to move beyond instrumental approaches to teacher training. Educators entering religious education are not simply learning methods; they are being initiated into a practice that carries ethical and formative weight. Kelchtermans' (2017) research on teacher identity formation suggests that early opportunities for reflective engagement significantly shape how educators understand their role and sustain commitment over time. For religious educators, such reflection enables them to situate their work within a broader vocational horizon rather than treating it as a specialized instructional task.

This vocational orientation also reshapes how theological knowledge is positioned within formation programs. Theology is not merely content to be mastered or transmitted but a critical resource for interpreting educational practice. When theological reflection is integrated with pedagogical training, educators are better equipped to navigate tensions between institutional demands and formative aims. Such integration allows theology to function as a lens for discernment, helping educators make sense of their responsibilities in concrete and often ambiguous situations.

The implications extend beyond initial preparation to the domain of ongoing formation. In contemporary educational contexts marked by policy volatility and intensifying accountability pressures, educators are frequently required to adapt to shifting expectations. Analyses of accountability and assessment cultures show that trust is not simply assumed but negotiated through how results are produced, interpreted, and used within systems of evaluation (Skedsmo, 2019). A vocational approach to ongoing formation invites educators to engage policies reflectively, discerning how institutional requirements can be interpreted in ways that remain faithful to formative and ethical commitments.

Institutional culture plays a decisive role in determining whether such vocational formation can be sustained. Schools and universities are not neutral environments; they are value-laden spaces that communicate priorities

through everyday practices. Ball et al.'s (2011) sociological analyses of schooling demonstrate that misalignment between institutional rhetoric and lived practice often leads to professional disillusionment. Faith-based institutions that aspire to support teaching as ministry must therefore attend carefully to how their cultures are enacted, not merely how they are articulated.

Leadership practices are central to this cultural formation. Educational leaders shape the interpretive environment within which educators understand their work. Research on leadership emphasizes that leaders who foster trust, dialogue, and ethical reflection create conditions in which educators experience their work as meaningful rather than merely performative (Hallinger and Chen, 2014). In contrast, leadership approaches that privilege efficiency and surveillance risk undermining the relational and vocational dimensions of teaching, even in institutions committed to a formative mission.

The vocational framework also invites a reconsideration of evaluation and accountability practices. While assessment and quality assurance are unavoidable features of contemporary education, an exclusive reliance on performance metrics often obscures the relational and interpretive labor inherent in teaching. Hatch's (2013) critical studies of accountability regimes caution that such systems tend to privilege what is easily measured over what is educationally significant. Institutions that affirm teaching as ministry are therefore challenged to develop evaluative practices that recognize professional judgment, ethical discernment, and formative presence alongside quantifiable outcomes.

Pluralism introduces an additional layer of complexity to educator formation and institutional culture. Religious educators increasingly teach in contexts where learners hold diverse religious, cultural, and moral perspectives. In such settings, vocation cannot be equated with doctrinal assertiveness alone. Research in religious education highlights the importance of dialogical competence and interpretive openness, enabling educators to engage difference constructively rather than defensively (Conroy, 2016). Formation that prepares educators for pluralism affirms that ministry in education involves patient engagement with diversity.

Relational dimensions of teaching, often overlooked in professional discourse, come into sharper focus within a vocational framework. Teaching as ministry emphasizes presence, trust, and attentiveness as formative forces in educational relationships. These dimensions resist easy quantification but are central to the lived experience of teaching. Studies on teacher resilience suggest that recognition of relational labor contributes significantly to sustained professional engagement and well-being (Day & Gu, 2013).

Well-being itself emerges as a structural concern rather than merely an individual one. When teaching is framed primarily in terms of output and compliance, educators may experience moral fatigue and disengagement. Institutional cultures that acknowledge the meaningful and socially valuable dimensions of teaching create conditions in which educators can sustain long-term commitment. Framing teaching as ministry thus reframes well-being as a shared institutional responsibility rather than a private coping issue.

Importantly, adopting a vocational perspective does not entail abandoning professionalism or accountability. Instead, it involves reordering priorities so that professional standards serve formative and ethical ends rather than functioning as ends in themselves. Educational theorists argue that professionalism gains depth and coherence when oriented toward human and communal purposes rather than technical efficiency alone (Biesta, 2017). Teaching as ministry affirms rigor and competence while resisting reductionism.

These implications suggest that sustaining teaching as ministry requires a holistic reimagining of educator formation and institutional culture. By integrating vocational reflection, ethical discernment, dialogical engagement, and professional practice, faith-based institutions can support educators as ministerial agents rather than mere functionaries. Such an approach positions religious education not as a marginal subject but as a central formative practice contributing to the moral, spiritual, and social development of learners in complex contemporary contexts.

8. Conclusion

This study began with a simple but pressing question: what is lost when teaching in religious education is understood only in professional or technical terms? By returning to the language of ministry, the paper has argued that teaching is never merely about competence or delivery. It is a deeply relational practice, shaped by responsibility, interpretation, and presence. To teach religion is not only to convey knowledge, but to accompany persons as they make sense of meaning, values, and belief within the concrete realities of their lives.

Throughout the discussion, teaching as ministry has been presented not as an idealized or romantic notion, but as something lived out in ordinary educational practice. Ministry here does not depend on formal authority or ecclesial status, but on how educators attend to learners, navigate difference, and exercise judgment in everyday classroom encounters. In this sense, religious education becomes a space where theology is quietly enacted—often in small, unremarkable moments that nonetheless carry formative weight.

The vocational model developed in this paper helps to name this lived reality more clearly. By understanding vocation as something enacted rather than possessed, the model acknowledges the tensions educators face between institutional demands, professional expectations, and formative commitments. Vocation emerges not as a fixed identity, but as an ongoing practice of discernment shaped by relationships, contexts, and decisions. Teaching as ministry, then, is less about certainty and more about faithfulness within complexity.

Attention to educator formation and institutional culture further reveals that this kind of teaching cannot be sustained by personal conviction alone. Educators are shaped by the environments in which they work, and institutional practices send powerful signals about what truly matters. When schools value efficiency over relationship or performance over formation, vocational commitments can easily erode. Conversely, when institutions recognize the moral and relational labor of teaching, they create spaces where ministry can take root and endure. Therefore, reclaiming teaching as ministry does not resolve all the challenges facing religious education today. What it offers instead is a way of speaking honestly about the work educators already do and the responsibilities they carry. It provides a language for holding together professionalism and vocation, accountability and formation, faith and practice. By doing so, it affirms religious education as a meaningful public practice—one that contributes quietly but profoundly to the formation of persons capable of discernment, dialogue, and responsibility in an increasingly complex world.

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