

A Developing Vision of the Seminary
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A seminary prepared to equip the church for the coming century has a clearly defined approach to leadership, a distinctive embodiment of the spiritual life in Christ, and a passion for congregations in their practical witness. For such a seminary to be effective, it must constantly renew this vision and nimbly adjust its approach to the changing dynamics of each age. Even as the seminary maintains its clear focus, it must engage its various disciplines in a continuing dialogue with the increased diversity of our age and the rapid progress of intellectual inquiry.

Leadership

A faithful and effective seminary must recruit and equip a company of leaders for the church. The model of leadership must be qualitatively different than many of the patterns that marked prior training of pastors. The central effort of pastoral leadership should be directed toward the task of recruiting and developing faithful leaders for the congregation. This effort needs to go beyond the traditional methods of organization and delegation. Its aim should be to create an invitational core of disciples who release authority rather than acquire it.

This requires a pastorate with effective analytic skills. The seminary must be able to train its students in skills that make them attentive in more settings than only the context of pastoral counseling. It is crucial for pastors to have the ability to accurately assess the range of dynamics that mark and shape a congregation. Moreover, this skill should enable pastors to effectively prescribe effective patterns for congregational vitality.

The effectiveness of a pastor in this form of ministry will be assessed by the way in which she or he maintains the focus of a congregation upon the person and work of Jesus Christ. Such a pastor cannot be timid to apply the authority and training he or she has received. However, this authority can never become unintentionally self-serving. In many ways the pastor should be accomplished at the art of becoming superfluous. Rather than performing as an authority figure wielding theological dogma, this parson is a resource and an embodiment of the Christian life and purpose.

The Spiritual Life in Christ

The seminary for this century must embody the spiritual life it hopes to engender in the congregations that it serves. In many ways this is a natural phenomenon for seminaries that are more distinctively focused around a given campus. The intense reflection and effort engender a natural sense of community amongst participants in the seminary community. Yet there needs to be a more conscious embodiment of the spiritual life of a Christian community than that which happens as a natural consequence of close quarters. Many seminaries already have worked to develop activities for the enrichment of seminarians' spiritual practices. However there must be a manner in which the fabric of seminary spirituality more effectively weaves itself into the life of each congregation.

The people who populate our seminaries are afflicted by the same dilemmas borne by members of our congregations. There is a high quotient of loneliness amongst our populace these days. In many ways, people participate in churches out of a desire to know and be known. There is a hunger for sincere and committed relationships that people perceive to be available in the church. This phenomenon is one that ought to ignite the church with possibility. Yet we find our leaders are often ill equipped for the task of knitting people together as an effective presence of the Body of Christ.

The particulars of this challenge are not easily overcome. However, it does seem clear that our seminarians need to be properly equipped with skills of spiritual direction. These skills are not only a gift of practice, nor solely a gift of intellectual reflection. Such a challenge is ultimately an art that will require a self-conscious effort of mentoring.

A Passion for Congregations

There are few human institutions that have the potential to shape and direct the daily lives of people as effectively as the church. Yet the church is quite often less a transforming agent as much as it is a reflecting mirror of our communities. The seminary must constantly keep the realities of congregational life in its sights if it is to equip leaders that engender transformational congregations.

This challenge is even more critical in an age that has become increasingly relativistic. Our seminaries need to equip pastors who have a clear understanding of themselves as the vanguard of a dynamic transformative minority. There is a sense in which our commencement exercises laden graduates with laudatory praise for their accomplishments. It is as if a graduate bears the full weight of authoritative training. Yet I believe it ought to be a moment to strip off the sweats and tense to prepare for the race of a lifetime.

This passion for congregations is also more than just a mindset of awareness. It becomes a guiding question for all of the instruction that takes place in seminary classrooms. The seminary should always dig deeper into the questions of theology and practice in a manner that is rarely accomplished amidst the daily grind of ministry. However, the outcome of each of the classes ought to be a learning that can be tangibly applied in the practice of pastoral ministry.

This is more than just an attempt by a practical theologian to crown all things with the practical imprimatur. It has to do with the necessity for churches to equip its membership with effective tools for theological reflection. The seminary may wish to have occasional “lay academies”. But its primary objective ought to be to prepare its students as effective leaders of such academies in an ongoing way on site in the place of their calling.

Closing Remarks

This provides a simple sketch of some themes that I have found important in the future arrangement of theological training. There are a variety of themes that can and should be refined from these few thoughts. This was an attempt to push something out of the door more than to polish a lasting reflective work. I welcome the insight and reflection of colleagues as we seek to frame anew the manner in which we witness to Christ in our changing age.