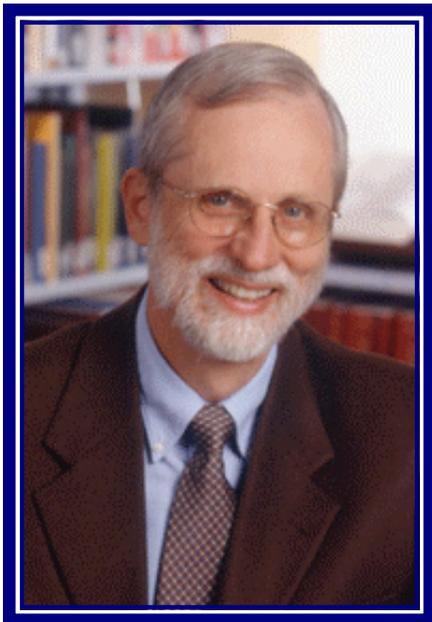


Chuck Foster on the Carnegie Foundation’s Study of Educating Clergy

By Tracy Schier



Chuck Foster, along with collaborators Lisa E. Dahill, Lawrence A. Golemon, and Barbara Wang Tolentino, authored *Educating Clergy: Teaching Practices and Pastoral Imagination* (Jossey-Bass, 2006). This book is the first in a series of comparative studies of professional education by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching.

Foster is director of the Carnegie Foundation’s study of clergy education and is emeritus professor of religion and education at Emory University’s Candler School of Theology where he was associate dean of faculty development from 1997 to 1999 and interim dean during the 1999-2000 school year. In addition to this work, Foster’s publications include *Educating Congregations: The Future of Christian Education*

(2006 [1994]); *Embracing Diversity: Leadership in Multicultural Congregations* (1997); and *We Are the Church Together: Cultural Diversity in Congregational Life* (1996). An ordained United Methodist minister, he received his M.Div. from Union Theological Seminary in New York and his Ed.D. from Teachers College-Columbia University.

This edited conversation is part of a series of interviews around the topic of theological education. The first one, with Katarina Schuth, is online. Others to be added in 2008 include David Cunningham and Malcolm Warford.

Q. *Since we are caught up in a politically hyperactive year, perhaps a place to begin is for you to talk about the “public role” of clergy and how seminaries are or are not addressing this.*

A. That is an interesting but complex question. When I was a student at New York’s Union Theological Seminary in the early 1960s, I would probably have responded to your question by describing the participation of faculty and students in movements of social change and their efforts to address prophetically issues affecting public well-being. I would have pointed to the quest of faculty members to cultivate in us a civic conscience for some kind of civic engagement or action as clergy. In my seminary experience those efforts would have emphasized the civil rights movement in this country and the liberation movements in colonized regions of the world.

That tradition of engaging seminary students in contemporary issues continues to this day. In the course of the Carnegie study, we met students in classes and working in supervised field settings. They were addressing not only issues of racism and poverty, but also homelessness, abuse, sexism, injustice in a variety of forms, as well as ethics in business, medicine, and government.

At the same time I sensed a shift from my own seminary days in how the public role of clergy is generally viewed in the seminaries we visited. The motivation to serve continues to be high. We met students who put themselves on the line building houses, working in soup kitchens, visiting in prisons and nursing homes. In some schools we heard students describe their involvement in projects of strategic and systemic change around these issues. But only at the Divinity School at Howard University did we see a faculty explicitly cultivating among their students, through their curriculum, a notion of *prophetic* ministry as an integral dimension of the public role of clergy.

Q. *For your book, *Educating Clergy*, you studied eighteen accredited schools around the country, representing Roman Catholic and mainline Protestant, evangelical Protestant, Reform and Conservative Jewish. Among these schools, did you find consistency in the ways that they teach/assist their students to understand their public role and how did they vary in approach?*

A. During the study we were actually impressed more by the diversity of approaches in seminaries to helping students understand the public character of clergy roles and responsibilities. A closer look at those approaches drew our attention to the influence of their various sponsoring religious traditions as a

primary source for the diversity we were observing. In other words, in a Mennonite seminary students encountered the influence of that school’s traditions of peace and justice in discussions of the public role of clergy; in the Catholic seminaries we visited, traditions of moral theology influenced their investigation of public issues; in the Lutheran seminary, students approached issues of public ministry through the lens of Lutheran theological traditions about the relationship of the church to the world.

Q. *In their attempts to help students negotiate tradition vis-à-vis modernity, do you find that seminaries of the varying denominations are helping one another or learning from one another?*

A. Dan Aleshire should answer this one! The Association of Theological Schools (ATS) and the Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning are two sites that convene inter-seminary conversation and collaboration on a variety of issues. ATS, for example, sponsored a series of consultations, maybe ten years ago, on the impact of globalization, racism, and sexism on theological education. The results were later published in *Theological Education*. In Wabash Center workshops and consultations the relationship of tradition and modernity is a common theme in discussions of curriculum and course syllabi.

Collaboration among theological schools does exist in regional consortia and denominational associations, but their attention seems to be predominantly focused on the sharing of library and curricular resources and the sponsorship of joint academic projects. Issues of the relation of tradition and modernity may come up in their discussions, but we did not hear about any significant inter-seminary collaboration on how to address the relationship of modernity and tradition in faculty decisions about what and how to teach.

Q. *Are theological educators imparting the idea of vocation to their seminary students? And perhaps another part to this question is this—do you see that there is widespread understanding among theological educators of their chosen academic profession as “vocation”?*

A. The concept of vocation is clearly articulated and given formal place in the formation programs of the Catholic seminaries we visited. The presence of students preparing for lay ministries has broadened this discussion beyond that of priestly formation. We saw a similar emphasis on helping students discern or clarify vocation in Protestant seminaries. Some use the language of “calling”

rather than vocation, but a general concern for integrity in ministry seems to be widely shared by the members of the faculties we visited.

During the study, we interviewed and observed faculty members whom their deans had identified as being especially reflective about their teaching. It became evident during our conversations that teaching was more than a career choice for them; it centered their lives in significant ways. Even for those with strong research and publishing records, teaching anchored their view of themselves and their purpose in life. We discovered that their colleagues tended to be similarly articulate about the place of teaching in their vocations. This sense of vocational self-consciousness seemed to permeate faculty teaching practices—in the passion they had for engaging students with the subject of their research and in modeling ways of relating to challenges and possibilities in that subject for some meaning or practice in ministry.

Q. *With the evolving religious “scene” in the U.S. and worldwide—for example, the rise of Islam, Evangelicalism, new efforts at ecumenism to name a few—what changes are seminaries making in light of this?*

A. Your question can be addressed quite concretely. A few seminaries have hired faculty in Islamic and Judaic studies. In several seminaries, graduate student research interests have been addressed by faculty appointments that cut across religions and Christian religious traditions. These appointments can be found both in so-called liberal and conservative schools. A few schools have or participate in inter-religious Christian and Jewish academic programs. Some seminaries continue to teach world religions comparatively with Christianity. Others teach Christianity as a world religion in dialogue with and influenced by other religions. Many schools have courses—indeed full programs—in missions, some now linking notions of political and economic development to patterns of religious inculturation.

Some faculty members in most of the seminaries we visited teach courses with a heightened sense of attention to the contextual agency and content of the forms of thought and practice in the traditions and forms of Christianity. This emphasis highlights student awareness to the influence of context on the origins of sacred texts, Reform or Black church preaching, feminist or native (in the various regional uses of this term) spiritualities, liberation theologies, and practices of pastoral care. It must be admitted, however, that while these influences can be found in most Christian theological schools, the denominational and theological stance of the school generally influences the angle of vision faculty take to the subject and the methodologies of their teaching.

Q. *Given that your work is part of the Carnegie efforts, can you talk about the similarities and differences between educating future clergy and educating other future professionals?*

A. Pedagogically there are several similarities among the various forms of professional education. Each is concerned with helping students appropriate several things. These include a body of knowledge that is deemed crucial to professional practice, the development of skills that go along with this knowledge, and the cultivation of professional identity and ethical grounding that establish norms for the practice and the use of that knowledge and those skills. At the Carnegie Foundation, Lee Shulman and William Sullivan have described these three pedagogical emphases as the cognitive, skill or practice, and identity apprenticeships in professional education.

With that said, there are distinctive modalities of teaching that distinguish engineering from medical from legal from theological education. Students can describe these distinctive features in the teaching they experience with remarkable precision. For example, in law schools the Socratic dialogue of case studies is dominant. Medical schools are organized around didactic classes and clinical rounds. In engineering schools, classes in analysis are followed by classes in design and lab work. In theological schools we discovered four widely shared pedagogical intentions in faculty teaching practices. Seminary educators, for example, intend that their students will become proficient interpreters of texts and of the situations and relationships they will encounter in ministry. They expect their teaching to contribute to the formation of student pastoral identity. They intend that students will understand and be able to engage the agency of the contexts of their ministries. And they intend that their teaching will help equip students for the performance of clergy roles—from preaching and teaching, to caregiving and managing. We eventually described these four emphases in the teaching practices of seminary educators as pedagogies of interpretation, formation, contextualization, and performance.

Q. *I have heard that perhaps up to 10 percent of today’s seminary students have some variation of learning difficulties. Do you see that this is properly acknowledged? And what steps are seminaries taking to help such students?*

A. The diversity of student learning ability is a reality in contemporary theological education—just as it is in higher education generally. This poses major pedagogical challenges to a faculty. The kinds of learning challenges are several. Some are related to physical or medically diagnosed learning disabilities. Federal guidelines provide certain protections and require certain

services to help students with these learning issues negotiate school requirements.

Another challenge for theological schools, however, originates in the diversity of student preparedness for a seminary education. Unlike the majority of students in the relatively recent past, contemporary students come from a wide variety of academic backgrounds, ranging from the quality and character of their undergraduate schools and the disciplinary patterns of learning they had developed to the length of time between graduation and their decision to enter seminary. Students bring a similar diversity of experience as participants or leaders in congregations or other forms of religious community. It is not unusual for a faculty member to meet a class with a summa cum laude graduate from a rigorous liberal arts college and another student who has never written a research paper; a twenty-two year old student just out of college and another with twenty-five years of professional experience as a teacher, lawyer, social worker or nurse; a student who had assumed a variety of leadership roles in the church from a very early age and another student with a recent conversion experience now searching for a denominational home. Over and over again during our visits to seminary campuses we would hear faculty say “Our students are really bright but they don’t learn the way we teach.”

The pedagogical challenge seminary faculty members face is further complicated by the range of learning goals and vocational expectations contemporary students bring to many seminaries. Some have a clear sense of a calling to religious vocation. Others do not. Some are interested in the academic study of religion, some seek spiritual formation, and others view theological studies as a way to address public issues such as homelessness and poverty.

Most seminary educators are aware of the diversity of student experience and expectation. We heard several describe their decisions about how to teach determined by accounting for differences in student background and preparation. Some schools—Louisville Presbyterian would be an example—have gone so far as to hire a staff person to help students develop skills they need for navigating the curriculum.

Q. *Do you find that seminary faculties are becoming more open to engagement in conversations/learning about pedagogy?*

A. There is a long tradition of commitment to good teaching in theological education. For the most part, that commitment has emphasized excellence in traditional pedagogies of lecture and discussion. It is a commitment graduates readily recognize and appreciate. For example, those participating in a small

survey we conducted readily identified significant and influential teachers in their seminary education.

At the same time, for more than a half century some seminary educators have explored newer forms of pedagogy. Beginning in the 1950s much attention was given to field based pedagogies reflected in new practices of supervision of student learning in pastoral care and field education. During the 1960s and 70s some schools began developing pedagogies rooted in the methods of various practices of ministry. Rebecca Chopp has described how the growing presence of women in seminaries during the 1980s and 90s heightened faculty attention to what and how they were teaching. It has been my perception that schools with a significant core of African American or international students during this same period of time had a similar impact on faculty pedagogies. In other words, changes in the composition of the seminary community have influenced faculty thinking about pedagogy.

Wabash Center workshops and consultations have also encouraged increasing faculty attention to teaching. As we concluded our study, however, I had the sense that conversations about pedagogy have generally tended to be more wide ranging and have tended to have had more influence on faculty teaching practices in seminaries sponsored by Catholic religious orders or related to mainline Protestant denominations than in some diocesan and some evangelical Protestant schools.

Q. *As you pursued your research for this book, what surprised you?*

A. First of all, I was pleasantly surprised by how much good teaching was going on in all eighteen schools we studied. Teachers were definitely engaging their students. We found that alumni remembered the teaching of some faculty with appreciation and could describe their continuing influence in their ministries. I found it interesting as we talked with students about their experience of faculty teaching, that many could describe in great detail significant features in a teacher’s practice—even to the point of imitating a teacher’s mannerisms and articulating persisting themes.

I was equally surprised by the *importance* of the alignment of classroom and communal pedagogies in cultivating the learning a faculty intended among their students. We used the term “communal pedagogies” to mean those patterns of learning that happen in the non-academic settings of chapel, field education, dining and sometimes residence halls. In some schools the congruence or alignment of classroom and communal pedagogies enhanced the integration of student learning across the curriculum. In other schools students struggled to make sense of the relationship of the disciplines, the values and the practices

they encountered in their education. I have often quoted a student to indicate something of the influence of the former. As a graduating senior anticipating his first placement in ministry, he felt that the integration of the knowledge and skills he had learned with his developing sense of pastoral identity had “chased him” through his entire seminary experience.

A third and significant surprise had to do with the apparent relationship between the continuing vitality of faculty conversation about teaching and learning and the existence of formal and informal curricular structures that facilitated the kind of integration faculty members were seeking in student learning.

Q. *You list three qualities by which theological institutions can be described, compared, and contrasted. I would like to home in on the second of these, institutional cohesion—the degree to which schools show internal consistency in their programming. You point out a number of accountabilities which include attention to ordination processes and standards, theological and doctrinal frameworks, hierarchies and policies of church bodies, denominational histories and ethos, disciplinary and academic standards, understanding of divine will, and contexts that define the purpose of students’ future ministries. Which of these accountabilities pose the greatest challenges to seminaries and why?*

A. My immediate reaction is to say all of the above! Your question highlights the interdependence of these accountabilities in educating future clergy. Perhaps the most difficult challenge for contemporary theological educators originates in the way students with diverse backgrounds and goals make sense of their encounter with these accountabilities as they move from matriculation through graduation and ordination into the practice of ministry. Theological education a complex of pedagogical sites and processes embedded in a course of study, in field education, in the worship, governance, and community life of the seminary, as well as in denominational ordination standards and processes. At the same time, each of these elements in the student’s education is undergoing change. Denominational traditions, ecclesial forms, and liturgical patterns are fluid. Few agreements exist about the canon of disciplinary knowledge students should know. And yet, seminary faculties are charged with the responsibility of creating a *community or shared practice* of teaching and learning that gives order and coherence to the learning of students.

We did discover that some faculties have developed a remarkably cohesive community practice of teaching and learning into which they invite their students,

but it is my perception that, as they encounter new challenges from students, the church, and contemporary culture, they must continually review and refine the intent and shape of that practice.

Q. *Eighty percent of alumni/ae of seminaries said they had encountered post-graduation challenges for which they did not feel adequately prepared. Please talk about some of the issues they brought up and how you see seminaries trying to address those challenges.*

A. This is one line from the study that has received a lot of attention. Most of the responses of alumni to this research question focused on practical issues they encountered in ministry. They regret that they had not learned how to conduct a funeral, or construct a budget and guide a fundraising campaign, or developed adequate skills in conflict management while in seminary. The concern is not easily remedied. Faculties report that many students are not interested in courses that deal with these technical aspects of ministry practice. At the same time, faculties often seem to assume that students know more about the conduct of church life than they actually do; hence, they don’t provide opportunities for students to develop competencies in addressing some of the technical challenges of ministry practice. The reality is that a significant number of contemporary students have had little experience of congregational life. Many have never held an office or held a position of leadership in a congregation. Indeed many have never had any formal leadership experience in any organization or group. They need very basic skills.

The challenge of preparing students for the technical challenges of pastoral leadership is compounded by the proliferation of the patterns of contemporary congregational life. In the early 1960s, when I was in seminary, the faculty of the school I attended could assume that my peers and I would probably be engaged in similar pastoral tasks each week in our ministries. That is not a viable assumption for contemporary seminary educators. Ron Heifetz has suggested that contemporary leaders must be ready to approach the tasks before them as adaptive challenges. This may suggest that seminary faculties need to help students develop the perspective and skills to view their own education as an adaptive rather than as a technical challenge.

Q. *Are you optimistic about American theological education and the route it is taking?*

A. Optimistic? My view is probably more mixed. When we concluded our study we were exhilarated by the vision, commitment, energy, and creativity of some schools in preparing future ministers. We were also enthused by the quality of much of the teaching we observed. We concluded the study sensing that some seminaries at least have embraced the changing composition of their student communities and the shifting landscape of the religious world as opportunities for rigorous inquiry and faithful witness. They seem to embrace the creative encounter of a vital tradition of faith and emerging patterns of ecclesial life. They draw students into lively conversations about the nature of God, the meaning and significance of Jesus, practices of the Christian life and so on.

The shadow side of this exciting time in Christian religious history is the clutter that inhibits attention to the creative edges of the contemporary Christian movement. There is an amazing amount of biblical, theological, liturgical, and ethical ignorance in the popular movements of the contemporary church. There is a strong preference for the relevance of the *experiential now* and a diminishment of the power of traditioning. Some of the worst features of consumerism and entrepreneurial capitalism have a strong foothold in contemporary church movements. Ideology often trumps theological or moral inquiry. Indeed one could view the recent attention to practices of the Christian life as the recognition of the extent of the loss of basic features in the character of Christian community in recent years. These influences permeate contemporary seminary life.

In other words as I reflect back on implications from our work in the Carnegie study, I am convinced that the next few years will continue to challenge theological schools. Some may not survive as financial sources diminish; as sponsoring denominations continue to decline; as student motivations to ministry shift. New technologies bring new possibilities for teaching and research; but they also challenge traditional notions of learning community and burden school budgets. The expansion and proliferation of disciplinary knowledge and methodologies will continue to challenge faculty efforts to develop a course of study that adequately prepares students to give leadership to contemporary religious communities. The list could go on.

The presence of significant challenges to theological education is, of course, not a new experience. Some that have no precedent may seem daunting. But even after rehearsing this litany of challenges, I again become optimistic because the story of seminary education is itself a story of adaptation to new and often unprecedented changes and challenges. Why should we have any less faith in contemporary seminary educators’ creative energies and outcomes?