Traditions and Transformation: The Educating Clergy Study and Outcomes for Theological Education

by Louis B. Weeks

Theological education comprises the teaching of religious traditions, and it depends upon methods of instruction that bear pedagogical traditions as well. At the same time, contemporary religious communities as well as the broader culture are changing more rapidly than ever. Proclaiming the gospel, teaching the faith among those seeking to be faithful, nurturing and caring for believers, leadership development, fostering fellowship and outreach, addressing matters in the public square — all these and many more functions of religious leadership demand a transformation in the nature and functions of pastors and others who lead congregations.¹

How can a seminary prepare people for religious leadership today? What should be taught? How? By whom? To what ends?

In the 1950s, a major study of theological education and ministry was led by H. Richard Niebuhr, Daniel Day Williams, and James Gustafson (pastor of a congregation at the time). They concluded, in The Advancement of Theological Education (1957), that degree programs at seminaries were woefully inadequate in preparing church leaders. Naming many problems, such as the “sharp [academic] definitions” of classical studies of Bible, theology, and history, the frequent lack of respect for courses in practical theology, and impingement of denominational constraints on courses of study, they expressed a yearning for faculties to collaborate in matters of teaching and learning. “Unfortunately,” they remarked in a cynical double negative, “in a not inconsiderable number of schools no effective provision is made for faculty discussion of curricular problems.”²

Another seminal study of theological education by David Kelsey in 1991, Between Athens and Berlin: The Theological Education Debate, sought common ground between the seminary responsibility for “forming pastors” and the academic imperatives of graduate higher education in North America. In the

¹ Many students of the subject use both “traditioning” and “transforming” in describing the work. Mary Boys, now of Union Seminary in New York City, for one, has consistently held that religious education, theological education, consists in making the religious traditions accessible while also teaching the re-making (transformation) of practice for distinctive situations and contexts. Religious education is “making manifest the intrinsic connection between tradition and transformation.” Educating in Faith. (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1969) p. 193 and passim.
1980s, according to Kelsey, elements of a new spirit could be discerned, at least among students of the subject. “Christian theological educators in North America produced the most extensive debate in print about theological education schooling that has ever been published.” In the rich and complex conversations that characterized the times, a host of professors teaching religion in colleges and seminaries, and especially in the field of practical theology, scrutinized their own teaching and learning and that of others in the fields. Charles Foster, Raymond Williams, Craig Dykstra were all deeply involved in that conversation.

From this time of “percolating” ideas concerning teaching and learning religious subjects and practices came numbers of new efforts. Dykstra, as he moved to become Senior Officer for Religion at the Lilly Endowment, together with other officers at the Endowment, in early 1995 announced an initiative on “Theological Teaching.” They asked, in effect, “What is distinctively theological about it?” “Where can best practices be learned?” and “How can all in the endeavor benefit from the insights and experience of others?”

This initiative included efforts to provide seminary faculty opportunities to learn from one another and from experienced leaders in extensive seminars and workshops, both pedagogy in a general sense and discipline-oriented methods of instruction. It also would provide monetary incentives for faculties to study their overall instruction and the preparation of students for religious leadership, the use of appropriate technology, and programs on the vocation of theological educators.

With a variety of scholars and practitioners, conversations took place in the mid-1990s on ways to embody this initiative. From these conversations, subsequent grant proposals, and negotiations with several institutions came a number of programs and projects for research. The Auburn Center for the Study of Theological Education, led by Barbara Wheeler, received support for many of these projects. Learning opportunities for faculty through the Association of Theological Schools were enhanced, and dissemination of the results in publications and other media began in earnest. Included among the new projects and programs was The Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion.

---

3 David H. Kelsey, *Between Athens and Berlin: The Theological Education Debate*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991. p. 1. Certain scholars, such as Wesner Fallaw and Edward Farley, had been offering insights during the 1960s and 1970s, but few institutions had responded to their work with integrative curricula.

The Wabash Center

The Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion was founded in 1996 with Raymond Williams as its first Director. It began immediately to offer seminars on teaching and learning for faculty in higher education at Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish theological seminaries and at colleges and universities across the United States and Canada. Among the members of the advisory committee for the center were William Placher, a noted theologian on the Wabash College faculty with Williams, and Charles Foster, Professor of Practical Theology at the Emory University’s Candler Divinity School.

When Williams retired in June, 2002, Lucinda Huffaker, who had been Associate Director, moved to become Executive Director at the Center. When she left in 2006, Nadine Pence succeeded her.

From the beginning, the Wabash Center brought together teachers of religion from seminaries and colleges with experienced teachers who led workshops and seminars. Participants focused on the goals of teaching and learning, both in the details of designing a class and in the broader strokes of structuring a seminary or college curriculum. Many who participated initiated conversations within their own schools and subsequently applied for competitive grants from Wabash to support sustained conversations among their faculties about pedagogy.

The Carnegie Study: Educating Clergy

Not long after the Wabash Center came into existence, a related but separate conversation began among the staff of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and its president, Lee F. Shulman. Concerned to study professional education broadly in America, the discussion soon extended to include the education of clergy. Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish theological educators were given places at the table, and Craig Dykstra expressed enthusiasm for the prospective project. Charles Foster was selected to direct the program in “Educating Clergy,” and he was joined by a team of research associates and assisted by an advisory committee as a Lilly Endowment grant to the Carnegie Foundation was made in 2001 to support the work.

Foster, Lisa Dahill, Lawrence Golman, and Barbara Wang Tolentino, assisted by support staff for the project, enlisted the cooperation of more than a score of divinity schools and seminaries, asking questions about the preparation of students, the fostering of pastoral, priestly, and rabbinical imagination, and particularly if theological education engaged in a “signature pedagogy,” distinct from educational enterprises elsewhere. Members of the research team visited ten of the seminaries for three-day listening times. Following an “appreciative
inquiry” mode of investigation, they also surveyed a larger number of schools, and they read extensively on the subject.

Foster and the research team determined a basic research question: “How do seminary educators foster among their students a pastoral, priestly, or rabbinic imagination that integrates knowledge and skill, moral integrity, and religious commitment in the roles, relationships, and responsibilities they will be assuming in clergy practice?” The research team expressed, in their subsequent publication, Educating Clergy: Teaching Practices and Pastoral Imagination (2006), initial frustration, for instead of a “signature pedagogy” for theological education they found four distinctive pedagogies at work in the process — interpretation, formation, contextualization, and performance.

They concluded that indeed a signature pedagogy did characterize theological, and it consisted in the confluence of these four pedagogies:

Briefly, pedagogies of interpretation seek to make of students mature interpreters of both the sacred texts and the subsequent texts of Christian history and theology. Knowledge of the reservoir of authoritative texts, critical thinking about them, application for ministry — all are parts of interpretation.

Pedagogies of formation focus on the “making of ministers.” They involve students in learning communities, in prayer, a “mutuality of concern,” acquiring skills for leadership, grounding in particular Christian traditions, and the honing of virtues that make for personal integrity and ministerial identity. They include the Orthodox notion of “eldership,” according to one professor’s perspective. This is “a practice of holiness based on respect and mutual companionship rather than on authority to grant grades.”

According to Foster, pedagogies of contextualization “complement pedagogies of interpretation by helping students become aware of the influence of contexts on religious meanings and in religious practices.” Contexts bear distinctiveness and require particular responses, perhaps novel ones in light of the traditions. Rapid changes in medicine, technology and global impingements demand novel, imaginative insights, as do the peculiarities of each congregational situation. Teaching theological contextualization involves placing students in a variety of distinct religious cultures and equipping them to discern significant similarities and differences among those situations — i.e. “engaging students in contextual encounters.”

---

6 Educating Clergy, pp. 88-98.
7 Educating Clergy, p. 120.
8 Educating Clergy, p. 128.
Pedagogies of performance include for most clergy preaching, teaching, and pastoral care — the quality of which enterprises is continually assessed and judged by others both within the religious community and more broadly in society. The book enumerates some of the activities of clergy — “from preaching, liturgical leadership, teaching and counseling, to the leadership of a neighborhood food banks and interfaith housing initiatives; from leading women’s Bible study groups to directing summer youth camps; from offering deathbed prayers to conducting bar and bat mitzvah classes.  

In common with courses of study in preparation for law, medicine, and engineering, the education of clergy involves three “apprenticeships of professional action” — cognitive, practice, and identity. The acquisition and effective use of knowledge, the application of learning for professional functioning, and the very person of the practitioner are learned from other professionals in the same business. They are best learned from active interchange with and coaching from “masters” in the trade.

Educating Clergy provides thumbnail sketches of historic figures who have negotiated well the interface of authoritative religious traditions and the complex forces of modernity, seeking hints and elements in the “pastoral imaginations” they developed to make profound contributions to religious communities and more broadly in the world. The book also provides special consideration of some practices and experiences in theological education such as supervised ministry and clinical pastoral education. Educating Clergy finds that similarities outweigh differences in the theological education offered according to different traditions.

The Conferences

In March 2005, Wabash Center Director Lucinda Huffaker issued the invitation to all seminaries accredited by the Association of Theological Schools to attend two-day conferences in Chicago, to take place early in 2006. The purposes included reviewing findings from a recent Auburn study, Signs of the Times: Present and Future Theological Faculty, and to learn from the Carnegie Foundation study, Educating Clergy: Teaching Practices and Pastoral Imagination. Leadership of the conference would include both Barbara Wheeler and Chuck Foster, as well as Paul Myhre, Associate Director of Wabash. Each school could send three representatives, but Huffaker urged each to send a dean or president as well as members of the full-time teaching faculty.

Staff from the Wabash Center were heartened by the response. Planning for eighty institutions to be represented at four conferences – twenty schools at each conference. The Wabash Center published a manual, Educating Clergy, that contains over one hundred case studies and provides guidance for teaching clergy to be prepared and competent in their work.
iterations of the conference – they actually registered more than one hundred that expressed a desire to participate. Therefore, they held six conferences altogether. Each conference consisted of plenary sessions led by Foster and Wheeler (or Sharon Miller, also from Auburn) on faculty demography, teaching cultures, pedagogies and apprenticeship models, and “communities of practice.” Small group discussions, arranged by Myhre, allowed faculty from schools of differing traditions to confer, and they were supplemented by times for the three members of each school delegation to plan among themselves for implementation. At each conference, all the schools represented were invited to submit proposals for grants of two thousand dollars each to support implementation of the teachings of Educating Clergy at their institutions. In addition, the schools were invited to submit requests for small grants of $2000 or request the services of a consultant provided by the Wabash Center.

**The Grants and Outcomes from the Protocol**

Of the 114 schools who participated in the Educating Clergy conferences, 101 applied for and received the $2000 grant, including 14 Roman Catholic, 2 Orthodox, 4 Jewish, 21 Interdenominational and non-denominational, one Unitarian, and 59 denominational Protestant seminaries. Paul Myhre in a preliminary report dated December, 2007 noted that 78 schools had received awards only, while 23 had received awards together with funds for consultants and small additional grants.

Reports from many of the schools showed most of the seminaries applied the funds to the costs of acquiring copies of the book for members of the faculty and to conversations and retreats to study the findings. Two schools used grant money for conferences where faculty from other schools attended. Ten schools initiated a new program or course. Four purchased new technology. Outside consultants came to 39 of the schools.

Topics that were addressed included curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, faculty community building, distance learning, formation of ministers, developing ways to teach contextualization, and others. Fifty-seven schools reported their activities would continue on the topics after grant funds had been exhausted.

**Some Examples of Outcomes**

The report from Atlantic School of Theology was typical of those that used the grant for a faculty retreat. In that setting, they could “develop a better sense of collegiality,” and they could have all the faculty “feel that they each had a serious and valued input into the shaping of their curriculum.” Among the 63 reports
received, more than 80% reported significant success in achieving the goals of faculty retreats and seminars.

Interpretation
The Northern Baptist Theological Seminary faculty discussed the book throughout the year, and they focused in large measure on new, online courses. They worked with Garth Rosell as a consultant especially on issues of interpretation for the new delivery mode.

Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond focused on its newly conceived Bible curriculum and how to teach in a nurturing pedagogy on interpretation. Among the outcomes, one New Testament professor worked with the homileticians to develop an integrative course helping interpret texts for sermons.

Formation
More than one third of the reports told of addressing the issue of formation for pastors, priests, and rabbis. At Oral Roberts University School of Theology and Mission, for example, the faculty met with Wabash consultant, N.Lynne Westfield of Drew Divinity School, to permit faculty members themselves a time to “reflect on issues of identity,” to consider together the mission of the school, to “discuss the connection between vocation, identity, and good teaching and healthy classroom environment.” Integration of the members of the previously separate graduate and undergraduate schools was also addressed.

Priestly formation in the midst of institutional changes was also the concern of Saint Francis Seminary. Melvin Michalski reported that even as the conferences took place on Educating Clergy, the faculty learned they would be collaborating to maintain formation responsibilities as the courses of study were transferred to Sacred Heart School of Theology for degree programs.

Union Seminary in New York reported they offered monthly faculty presentations for students on the members’ own spiritual formation as a result of their time together discussing Educating Clergy. In addition, they began to offer third year students as mentors for those in their first year of study to the same end — spiritual formation.

Contextualization
Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary used the grant to explore various areas of contextual pedagogy. They discussed together the special contexts for Mennonite congregational ministry, including the context of God’s reign that is present but not fulfilled.” They worked to find ways of providing contextualization in the their courses, especially in those related to globalization.

St. Meinrad Seminary also focused their efforts on improving the pedagogy of contextualization — this time for priests–in-formation from other parts of the
worldwide Church. They established an on-campus English Second Language program.

**Performance**

Mount St. Mary’s Seminary secured the services of Bruce Birch from Wesley Seminary to help them work on all four pedagogies and the interrelationship of performance with formation. They focused on the “ideal graduate from the institution, which led to definition of several measures of performance. Secondly, they invited some graduates for an assessment of the adequacy of their preparation for priesthood — a window on the nature of performance and its assessment.

**Assessment**

Careful consideration of assessment was the center of many faculty retreats and conferences. At Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, the faculty met with Lawrence Goleman, one of the Educating Clergy study team to assess the school’s curriculum. It also gave occasion for the new president, William Carl, to have a dialogue with other members of the faculty concerning the re-envisioning of the mission statement for the school.

Dean John Carroll at Union-PSCE reported that faculty retreats and discussion over a three year period focused on the curricula for basic degree programs, especially seeking measures of effectiveness in all four pedagogies, given the three distinctly varied modes of “delivery” in Charlotte, in an extended campus program, and in residential programs of study. “As part of that process,” he explained, they undertook “the task of formulating new or revised degree program intended outcomes that will provide a basis for assessment of the educational effectiveness of our degree programs. How well are we equipping persons to be pastoral and educational leaders in congregations?”

As a result of discussions at the conference they attended, the representatives from McCormick Seminary sought and received a plan for “complete assessment” of the outcomes of the M.Div. program. McMaster Divinity School likewise helped the assessment and subsequent re-design of the Christian education component in their program of study.

**New Programs**

Charles Bouchard, who directed the project at Aquinas Institute of Theology in St. Louis Missouri, reported that they spent funds from the grant to support a discussion among the faculty of the seminary and members of the faculty from the Cook School of Business at St. Louis University. They explored together a dual degree program that would offer special training in management for certain leaders of congregations. It would focus on skills of business management and organizational development, “crucial to the formation of an effective faith
community." Plans for offering apprenticeships related to a dual degree are underway.

Michael Jenkins, Dean and Vice-President for Academics at Austin Seminary, chose two “newer” faculty to attend the meeting in Chicago with him. Arun Jones, who had just been promoted to Associate Professor of Mission and Evangelism, and Monya Stubbs, in her second year on the faculty teaching New Testament. Already Dean Jenkins had selected Jones to head a curriculum revision effort at Austin, so the conference came at a propitious time in the life of the faculty.

The three representatives from Austin began at the conference to consider a curriculum revision based on the teaching and learning of Christian virtues. At the next faculty meeting after the conference, Jones and Stubbs reported their enthusiasm for redesigning a “Signature Pedagogy” based on appropriation of virtues. Jenkins remembered that though the report came at the end of a grueling meeting, the two relatively new members of the faculty spoke with such energy and commitment that everyone paid close attention and subsequently approved asking for the grant in order to study the core virtues which might become central for the Austin curriculum.

With the money from the grant, small honoraria were provided to five faculty in differing disciplines to write essays exploring the ways in which their disciplines might be useful in teaching Christian virtues. When members of the faculty in Old Testament at first objected that “virtues” were of Greek and not Hebrew origin, a fruitful discussion then ensued on the nature and application of cardinal, theological virtues in the whole of Christian scriptures. As a result, Austin’s curriculum of study has become and continues to become more and more pertinent for the preparation of pastors and other church leaders.

Integration and Re-Calibration
Wabash Center administrators named two schools as particularly creative in employing the grant funds. Both subsequently received larger grants from Wabash in addition to those provided in the protocol under review. Brite Divinity School and the Interdenominational Theological Center reported significant changes as a result of studying Educating Clergy.

**Brite Divinity School:** The initial grant, according to Nancy Ramsay, Executive Vice-President for Academics, deepened the assessment of the curriculum by asking about a “signature pedagogy” already in place and using the four pedagogies to explore changes needed. A faculty retreat and several other faculty consultations informed by the book, Educating Clergy developed the concept of Brite’s “Signature Pedagogy” and the four components characteristic of seminary education as they appear in Brite’s curriculum. Ramsay reports: “The concepts of the four interdependent pedagogies and their unique calibration
as a Signature Pedagogy have served us well in both assessing the curriculum that was in place and in constructing the shifts we wanted to make that were aligned with our ethos.” As a result, the faculty determined to focus more thoroughly on pedagogies of formation and contextualization. Ramsay uses the term “re-calibrate” to describe the revisions, for she explains all four pedagogies were present previously. One unanticipated benefit she reports is “the way these concepts helped us develop strategies to support assessment of student achievement of the curricular goals.” She rejoiced that the “turf wars” naturally inherent in the older curriculum had been diminished as curriculum revision moves forward.

A substantial, new grant from Wabash is permitting the faculty at Brite together to form a distinctive “Signature Pedagogy” for the school. Consultant Jack Seymour met with the task force guiding the study. At Brite, the pedagogical rubrics from Educating Clergy have been used directly for concerted attention to teaching and learning appropriate for preparation of pastors and other leaders of congregations.

**Interdenominational Theological Center (ITC) and Historically Black Theological Schools:** From ITC, Edward Wimberly, Vice-President for Academic Affairs and Provost at the Interdenominational Theological Center in Atlanta, served on the advisory committee for the initiative. He directed a program, based at ITC, which drew together five of the six of the Historically Black Theological Seminaries. The Samuel DeWitt Proctor School of Theology at Virginia Union University, Howard School of Theology at Howard University, Shaw University Divinity School, and Payne Theological Seminary established practices unique to their own contexts.

For example, the Samuel DeWitt Proctor School of Theology at Virginia Union had just instituted a curriculum organized around the central theme of the “Middle Passage,” which drew an analogy between African people being captured in their homelands, sent by ships to the Americas, put in a bondage in the New World from which they had to seek liberation. Following this model, the three years of the theological curriculum were named according to stages in the liberation process — from being faced with new challenges, to gaining awareness, and eventually to transformation. In the final year of theological education, each student had to participate in a year long integrative course, which sought to enable the student to reflect on and integrate his or her experience of theological education. The end result was to foster in the student his or her pastoral and ministerial imagination. In addition to the Middle Passage curriculum phases, three times a year there was an all-school weekend retreat where outside resource people were invited in order to lead the students to reflect on their experiences of the Middle Passage as an individual, as well as being part of the theological community.
In the formative evaluation session with the Proctor School of Theology, the conclusion surfaced that the Wabash Historically Black Theological Schools Conference helped them to define the student learning outcomes outlined by the four ATS outcome standards as well as to see how the outcomes could be assessed throughout all phases of the Middle Passage experiences of students as well as in the final year long integrative course.

The Shaw University Divinity School focused formative evaluation by engaging in a process of establishing student learning outcomes in light of the mission and strategic plan. Ed Wimberly and his wife Anne led the faculty in a process of establishing student learning outcomes in line with the ATS four standards.

The Payne Theological Seminary faculty had already begun the process of refining their learning outcomes by inviting the author of the ATS guidebook in learning outcomes to lead their faculty in the process of establishing learning outcomes. Funds from Wabash supported establishing rubrics or operational assessment guidelines for integrative courses. Moreover, they discussed a pictorial model of the planning and evaluation process based on feedback from assessing the actual learning outcomes of students.

The two faculty members who attended the workshop from Howard found ways to utilize rubrics to assess learning outcomes in their classes. In addition, Howard had already employed a Coordinator of Outcomes Assessment and established a faculty team for assessing student learning outcomes. This team implemented the use of the ATS Profiles of Ministry and the Graduating Student Questionnaire. In short, Howard embraced the learning outcome model, and the two faculty members who attended the conference were able to reinforce what Howard’s interim Dean and Coordinator of Outcome Assessment was attempting to implement. They are also working on developing a learning ethos focused on fact-based assessment rather than on anecdotal reporting, and they are working on using the results of their assessments for improving teaching and learning.

The ITC faculty used the Wabash Conference in June of 2007 to further define the nature of student learning outcomes and how rubrics relating to these learning outcomes could be constructed for three cross-curricular courses. These three curricular courses relate to the first, second, and third year of theological education. For example, Foundations for Ministry is taught in the first semester of the first year of matriculation. Middler Profession Assessment is taught in the second semester of the second year of theological education approximately half way through the Master of Divinity curriculum, and a Senior Integrative Seminar is taught in the final semester of the students’ matriculation at ITC.
Conclusions

In conclusion, the consideration of teaching and learning in theological seminaries has come a long way, at least for most schools! From the 1950s when Niebuhr, Williams, and Gustafson claimed that there were no effective opportunities for most faculties to discuss curriculum and when teaching methods in most courses were assumed to be those of higher education more generally, we have now moved substantially to the eager reception by so many seminaries of the study of their modes and methods of teaching. From the vigorous debate in publications in the 1980s related by David Kelsey to the consideration by entire faculties of their pedagogies and their fostering of apprenticeships also represent a quantum leap.

According to Wabash Center Director Nadine Pence, who arrived after grants had been made and was able to hear the results, the Educating Faculty grants facilitated many seminaries doing what they already needed to do, in many different ways. “For such a small amount of money to each school, many good things happened regarding teaching and learning, curriculum planning, and the preparation of clergy.”

If seminary faculties have “come a long way,” they still have a long way to go. Some schools evidently do not yet spend energy regularly on examination of the ways of educating clergy. Many seminaries still depend upon supervised ministry and field education to bear the load in offering pedagogies of contextualization and formation, while courses in Bible, history, theology, and frequently ethics as well dwell primarily, sometimes exclusively, in the pedagogies of interpretation. Practical theology courses still carry most of the weight in the pedagogies of performance.

Moreover, few of the reports indicated real consensus on the responsibility of the entire faculty in assuring graduates acquire insofar as possible all the necessary knowledge, skills, and attitudes to serve as competent pastors and leaders of communities of faith. The words of Bruce Hutchinson, who directed the Queen’s Theological College project, summed up the experience of that faculty: “The workshop was one of very few times that faculty have come together to focus solely on the why, what, and how of teaching. There was enthusiastic support for further discussion and work on the topic.”