

# Final Report for Lexington Project

*Episcopal Theological Seminary of the Southwest, March 1, 2008*

## I. Issue and Context

- Describe the issue you addressed and how it related to teaching and learning concerns in your school. Why was this issue significant?

The goal of the project arose, in part, out of the unexpected circumstances of the ETSS Dean, then ending his third academic year in office, suddenly resigning as the first group of faculty members headed to Maine for the initial consultation in June 2005. Finding ourselves suddenly short of a Dean, we reconsidered the narrative that we brought to Maine as a symptom of our need for a program of faculty development. Our goal then became to “enhance the quality of faculty life through corporate reflection on our history, our theological diversity, and our educational visions.” We would meet this goal by using the Lexington grant to establish a context and practice for considering our vocation as a theological faculty. We were to seek such conversation as would establish trust and improve mutual understanding and collaboration.

## II. Project Design

- Describe and assess (e.g., what worked, what didn't) activities or strategies that you used to implement the project.

As our project's aim was to build relationships among ourselves as the faculty body, we set aside time to meet for discussion. Victor Klimoski visited in fall 2005, meeting with us as a group and interviewing faculty members individually. He sought to identify common concerns, questions, and anxieties, as well as hopes and passions. Victor's report enabled us to specify the main topics for future conversation and alerted us to the challenges involved. Looking back over the past two and half years, it is striking how accurately Victor mapped the discursive terrain through which we would be travelling. In order to pursue the project, we arranged a series of off-campus meetings, generally of three hours, that were professionally facilitated. Our consultants helped us set agendas before meeting, identify priorities, negotiate conflict, structure discussions, manage our time, and evaluate what we were learning.

## III. Resources Used in Developing and Implementing the Project (e.g., publications/books, resource experts, facilitators)

- How did these materials or the expertise of outside resource people help or not help the faculty as it worked on the project issues? In commenting on resource people, please do not use their names.

Our consultants, who had previously worked with other educational groups, were excellent. They were good listeners, gave accurate feedback about what they had heard, were flexible about the direction of the group discussions and provided us with written summaries of the meetings. The project time frame was congruent with a two-year interim period between permanent deans,

thus our work together was affected by one dean's rather abrupt leave-taking, the beginning of an interim dean's work, a failed search for a new dean, a second search, the calling of a new dean and his overlapping time with the interim dean who stayed for two academic years. Thus, over the course of the project, we were involved in a more general discussion of our common life and were dealing with changes and signal events in the life of the seminary.

We named our meetings the "Lexington Seminar," a name that has lasted beyond the period of the grant. The content and structure of these discussions varied. At one meeting early on, we constructed a timeline of the seminary's history with faculty members contributing in ways that reflected their length of service. Because faculty tenure with the institution varied from thirty-plus years to less than one on the faculty, we constructed a rather "thick" story of important events and themes in the life of our school, correlating what was going on at ETSS with historical, social and denominational events and trends. As we did this on a paper scroll, we bought a sturdy tube container for it and with some whimsy invested it with significance as an artifact that was symbolic of our work together.

The act of constructing the "timeline"—perhaps even more than the finished product-- served to incorporate new faculty into the group, reveal patterns in institutional patterns of behavior, put signal events, such as the most recent dean's tenure, into perspective and in general led to a much fuller and more forgiving sense of the history and situation of the institution.

At other meetings we focused on identifying issues and goals related to the calling and the integration of the new dean into the Seminary and faculty life. We took the time fairly near the beginning of the project to share deep theological and pedagogical beliefs (see below, V). As our focus was on our relationship with each other, we felt free to adjust our agendas to current issues or concerns. Some moments were awkward, tense or difficult; others were touched with intimacy and humor.

#### **IV. Project Results**

- In light of what you set out to do, what did you learn about the issue you had defined?

We discovered what, at this stage of our history, we were prepared to learn: that intimacy, trust and mutual respect take work, honesty, risk-taking, and an ability to listen to and value those with whom we disagree. In a concluding conversation among ourselves, we realized the importance - and responsibility - of the faculty to take the initiative in solving problems, the importance of separating issues from personalities, and a renewed sense of the importance of providing contexts for working out relational issues among the faculty distinct from those occasions on which we meet to conduct the business of the school.

- How did this project help sharpen your concerns around the processes of teaching and learning in your school? Did the project affect the way faculty teach?

One of our most lively and profound discussions concerned "formation" as the concept that names the unity among the diverse aspects of our work. We examined the goals, character, and processes of ministerial formation; we identified some of the relationships between processes of

formation and specific community activities and academic areas; we opened up an ongoing discussion of formation as common to all our programs, though differently nuanced in each case. In the process, we discovered common ground regarding our understanding of ministerial formation, as well as appreciating the differences fostered by particular theological emphases and ecclesial experience. This conversation furthered other conversations, gave us insight into one another, and contributed to a sense of common mission. These conversations continue.

- How has the faculty been impacted by the project?

The “Lexington Seminar” has had a very positive effect on us individually, on our relationships with one another, on our ability to work through some residual hard feelings and tensions, and on our commitment to maintain and nurture collegial life. Our abiding questions are “what does it mean to be colleagues on a *faculty*” and “how shall we continue what we have begun?”

- How has the school as a whole been impacted by the project?

In the course of our discussions, we realized that the ministerial formation of our students depends to a significant extent, perhaps more than we have cared to admit, on our own formation as faculty, upon our commitment to this as a self-conscious enterprise for which we are mutually responsible. Formation, for us, has many levels from interdisciplinary conversation and teaching, through curricular imagining and planning, holding one another accountable, and maintaining agreed procedures, to mutual care and prayer for one another. We have some sorry experience of how poor relations among faculty leach into the larger community and affect our students. It is early to identify the positive results of the “Lexington seminar” but several of us have commented on the present high morale among students and on improved relations between faculty and staff. Given time, we should be able to discern whether these are matters of happy coincidence or, at least in part, the fruit of our new practices of collegiality.

- What would you do differently in regard to the design or implementation of this project?

In retrospect, we might have begun the consultation process a littler earlier or tweaked a few minor things, but overall we are satisfied with the project’s design and implementation.

- What issues continue to challenge you and what new issues arose?

During the project time, one of our challenges was how to incorporate a new dean into the life of the faculty. We were intentional in discussing issues and concerns related to the new dean in terms of how we would relate to him and the issues he would face coming into a group already formed around history and mission. Though the interim dean had not attended, we were keen to include the new dean in the Lexington Seminar sessions as one way to establish a good working relationship and to lift the weight of some unhappy institutional history.

As for continuing issues, we have identified the need to maintain a level of frankness and mutual trust such that we can engage difficulties that arise and the general situation of being a mainline seminary at this time. We also think we will need to continue to name the role

institutional and relational histories play in our dynamics; finally a continuing issue is paying attention to process.

## V. Sharing the Wisdom

- What has the project taught you about theological education, especially the challenges of teaching and learning, that you would want to share with other seminaries?

The whole experience reinforced our sense that formation is at the heart of theological education and that the individual and corporate dimensions of formation are multiply entwined. We also came to understand – something of a sobering realization – that the contours and quality of faculty life are both an indicator of the health, and a model for, the life of the community. The “Lexington Seminar” has proved both the effectiveness of our approach to faculty collegiality and its continuing importance. We have, therefore, established the “seminar” as a permanent body within the committee structure of the seminary, albeit a unique element in that it does not deal with “business” or have decision-making powers beyond those to do with its own practice or the well-being of the faculty. We are committed to continuing to meet, at least seven times a year. A charter for the seminar is now incorporated into the faculty handbook and approved by the Board of Trustees. That charter is as follows:

The “Lexington Seminar” differs from the above committees in that, though it meets on a regular basis, it is not a decision-making body and has no reporting responsibilities.

The Seminar is a means of faculty development, in both its corporate and individual aspects. This development, therefore, includes attending to collaborative working practices, the quality of relations among faculty and between the faculty and the Dean, and initiatives for enhancing the corporate life of the faculty. Issues of theology, pedagogy, formation, and curriculum are addressed in order to enhance mutual understanding and collaboration. Faculty members may present for discussion matters related to their research or teaching. The Seminar will also consider faculty sabbatical proposals and engage topics such as faculty compensation, resources, and working conditions. The Seminar is responsible for electing faculty representatives to the seminary’s Board of Trustees. Though the Lexington Seminar is not a committee for the transaction of business, it may refer matters to the Faculty Administrative Council, one of the standing committees, or to the Faculty and Education Committee of the Board.

The members of the Lexington Seminar are:

- All regular faculty and administrators with faculty status, including the Dean.
- The Lexington Seminar meets for one afternoon seven times a year: twice during each semester, and once during each set of “faculty days” (August, January, May). The Seminar may gather for additional meetings as needed.

Our experience is such that we would strongly commend a body of this kind to other seminaries as a means of achieving a high quality of faculty collaboration and mutual regard.

- Is there a particular story or anecdote that captures the spirit of your project and the learning it has produced?

Perhaps the most tender spot in our co-existence as faculty is, ironically but not surprisingly, that about which we clearly feel most passionate: the teaching of our common faith and the theological reflection that involves. So radioactive is the expounding of our various theological visions that, though we may be effusive about them in the classroom, even urgent occasionally with a faculty friend, we are struck theologically dumb when we gather as a faculty. During our first year, several of us mentioned how disappointing this was whilst still preferring to talk about how disappointing it was rather than venture onto the theological ice itself. Our facilitator eventually suggested that we went boldly into the corporate dark and shared both our theological passions and our passion for the work that we do. The following silence reached such a profundity as to be the envy of life-long Quakers and had any of us coughed, the rest would have fled screaming from the room. Eventually, someone suggested that we left the barricade of tables behind which we were sheltering and sat in a small circle of chairs, taking turns to speak, without, as they say in 12-step programs, any “cross-talk.” While the facilitators took notes, we each stumbled through our some of deepest joys and most perduring hopes. The significance of this event is measured partly in that we have since forborn discussion of anything particular that was said but have rather referred to the experience in somewhat hushed and awful tones. We have all mentioned, at some time or another, that we look back on this as a high-point of our venture and as the standard of free speech that we still hope to attain, one day without benefit of special circumstances and furniture. There was, we believe, a vital, if precarious, accession of trust in one another: this, and most especially with regard to a common theological life, is what we have promised one another we shall nurture.

## **VI. Budget**

Corder, Thompson (Facilitators)	\$12,500.00
Vic Klimoski (Initial Assessment)	1,808.00
Meals and Snacks	<u>711.02</u>
Total Spent	<u>\$15,019.02</u>