

THE LEXINGTON SEMINAR PROJECT REPORT

TRINITY LUTHERAN SEMINARY

I. Issue and Context

Located in Columbus, Ohio, Trinity Lutheran Seminary opened its doors in September, 1978, as a result of a merger between Hamma School of Theology, a seminary of the Lutheran Church in America, and the Evangelical Lutheran Theological Seminary, affiliated with The American Lutheran Church. Both schools traced their histories back to the beginnings of Lutheran theological education in Ohio in 1830. Today, Trinity is one of eight seminaries of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America with an enrollment of approximately 200 students and 22 full-time faculty members. Its mission statement - *Trinity Lutheran Seminary forms leaders for Christ's church at work in the world* - articulates its primary focus which is preparing ordained and lay leaders for the church. The seminary offers a classical theological curriculum consisting of biblical studies, historical and systematic theology, and practical theology.

While situated solidly within the ELCA, Trinity's faculty is experiencing many of the challenges and tensions present in the larger world of theological education. We find ourselves living in a culture in which more continues to be expected of us both as a seminary and as individual members of the faculty as time passes. Yet, limited resources have resulted in a faculty that is somewhat smaller than it was ten to fifteen years ago. As a consequence, a significant number of our faculty members carry administrative responsibilities in addition to their teaching load. The narrative that we brought to our initial Lexington Seminar gathering in Maine is focused on the many competing demands on the faculty's time - teaching, scholarship, administrative and committee responsibilities, candidacy matters, service to the church, and more - and what that means for building community among faculty members, and for the formation of pastors and leaders in the church.

As our faculty began talking together about how to shape our project, several opportunities emerged at Trinity that played a role in the conversation. The fall of 2005 brought three new faculty members to the community who introduced fresh perspectives and renewed energy to the table. The book *Educating Clergy: Teaching Practices and Pastoral Imagination*, part of the Carnegie Foundation's study of education for the professions, was published in early 2006. Since Trinity is one of the seminaries featured in the book, its appearance invited much discussion by the faculty on our teaching and our curriculum. It is possible to say that we began to look at ourselves in a new light - to see ourselves in relation to a broader picture of theological education and to claim our strengths in a way that we may not have done previously. (Lisa Dahill, one of the authors of *Educating Clergy* is one of the three new faculty members mentioned earlier. Her experience with the project that led to the book provided additional energy for our conversations.)

In addition, the faculty had been engaged in an ongoing review of both the seminary's academic calendar and its curriculum for a number of years. In January, 2006, the decision was made to move from a calendar based on quarters to one based on semesters with a January term. This meant that we became immersed in a significant revision of our curriculum. At least some of the conversation surrounding the calendar change and how we would restructure the curriculum focused on matters related to whether the changes would alleviate or exacerbate the demands on time for both faculty and students. The new calendar and curriculum took effect beginning with the fall semester in 2007.

In the midst of all this, as the faculty talked about what our Lexington Seminar project might be, we began to think together about the quality of our life as a community of teachers and scholars. We wondered whether we could say that we share a common sense of mission and purpose. What is it that gives shape and meaning to our sense of vocation in this place? What are our hopes and visions for Trinity, for our students, and for ourselves? How does our understanding of vocation influence the way that we organize our work together? How can we build a sense of faculty community that in turn influences the life of the entire seminary community? What might "Sabbath" mean for faculty members? Key words began to emerge in our discussions – community, formation, integration, Sabbath, vocation. These became the concepts around which we formed our project.

II and III. Project Design and Resources Used

We developed three goals for our project:

1. That we as a faculty examine our own culture and the specific ways in which we organize our work in order to find ways to do it more effectively and efficiently for the sake of our vocation.
2. That the faculty explore in depth changing dynamics in church and culture that affect theological education and the challenges they present for the way in which we live out our vocation.
3. That the faculty experience a time of retreat in which to foster relationships with one another and to reflect together on the nature of Sabbath and its meaning for our vocation as teachers and scholars.

There was a specific strategy developed to address each goal. Goal #1 will be discussed later in this document. We begin with goal #2. The strategy envisioned here was to spend a day in conversation with a resource person familiar with the changing dynamics of the life of both congregations and theological schools. Our hope was that this individual could shape a discussion of these issues that would help us discern how we might set priorities for our work. This event took place in April, 2007, with a day in conversation with Dr. James Wind from the Alban Institute. As we planned for this day, we asked Dr.

Wind to help us reflect on our mission statement focusing particularly on specific words – forms, leaders, at work, world.

The strategy developed in relation to the third goal involved an overnight retreat for the faculty at the Proctor Center, a retreat/conference center operated by the Episcopal Church located about an hour from Columbus. We invited Dorothy Bass to serve as retreat leader/resource person to help us focus especially on the nature of Sabbath and what this might mean for our communal life. This event took place in late August, 2007. It replaced our usual one-day faculty retreat scheduled every year during orientation week for new students. This two-day retreat began with lunch on the first day and ended with lunch on the second day. This was the first time in many years that the faculty had retreated together overnight.

We have not yet carried out the strategy we intend to use to meet the first goal, which is to invite a resource person from the world of theological education to spend time on our campus to help us consider how we organize our work together. Because of the change in our calendar and curriculum, we have decided to postpone this experience until Spring, 2008, in order to give us time to live into this new reality. We are currently in the process of identifying the resource person that will be most helpful to us. We hope that this “performance audit” will allow us examine the overall culture of the faculty, as well as the ways in which we structure ourselves to do the tasks we are called to do related to curriculum, student matters, candidacy, etc..

How well did the first two strategies work? Assessing specific outcomes of experiences that consist primarily of conversation is difficult. Both events were well attended by members of the faculty, though there was occasional grumbling by one or two about the amount of time being invested when there was other work to be done. But, for the most part, faculty members took seriously the opportunities to gather and reflect. Both events stimulated conversation that is still continuing in other ways. The faculty, in both instances, began to talk about matters of community and formation and about their own experience in relation to these concepts at what may be a new level. One individual has stated that he feels that we allowed ourselves to be vulnerable with one another in a way that was new to us, especially at the retreat. The resource persons we invited to be with us did a fine job of helping us place our own experience at Trinity into the larger context of theological education as a whole and the wider culture in which we all live and work.

The retreat was perhaps the more valuable of the two strategies, simply because it provided us with more time to be together and reflect on our common vocation. In addition to the planned experiences with our resource person, we worshipped together, ate together, and many of us stayed up late sitting in a circle and simply talking with one another. In this sense, the retreat was truly Sabbath time for many of us. From our conversations, the faculty generated a list of ideas for change related to our community life and the way we organize our work together that we have already begun to address. I will say more about some of these in the next section.

IV. Project Results

In one respect, we may not have learned from this project anything that we did not already know – that the pressures that we experience in our work, especially the competing demands on our time and commitments, are simply part of the reality of theological education today. One of our resource persons reminded us that the sense of being overwhelmed that so many of us feel in our work should not be seen as a failure on our part. It is the nature of the world in which we live. In fact, this same individual suggested in spite of the fact that we are often exhausted by our multiple responsibilities to church, academy, seminary community, and family, we find enough joy in each of them that we are not ready to willingly give up any of them.

At the same time, perhaps the Lexington Seminar experience came to us at a *kairos* moment in our life together. With new faculty members and a change in curriculum and calendar, it was a ripe moment in time for us to think about our life together as a faculty with a common vocation in service to the church and the academy. The project provided an impetus and resources to make that happen. At our final gathering in Maine in October, 2007, Mac Warford spoke to us of the need to create a changed space in which the new may happen. In so many ways, this project did that for us.

There are some more specific results that we can point to as well:

- The faculty has committed to a monthly faculty social hour after our regular Friday afternoon faculty meeting. We have done this occasionally in the past, but we now intend to do it on a regular basis. So far, it has only happened once, but we are pushing to provide a structure so that it will indeed become a monthly event.
- For a number of years the faculty has met monthly for a faculty lunch. Though initially intended as a time to share scholarship, syllabi, teaching practices, and other common interests and concerns, these gatherings have tended to become an occasion to talk about matters for which there is not enough time at monthly faculty meetings. As a result of conversations related to this project, we have agreed that no less than 50% of our lunches will now be devoted to those original concerns. One faculty member has worked with the dean to make this happen. This year we will exceed that 50% commitment.
- For two of those faculty lunches this fall, the faculty agreed to read and discuss *Transforming Our Days: Finding God Amid the Noise of Modern Life* by Richard R. Gaillardetz, a book recommended to us by one of our resource persons. Those discussions have helped us continue to think about the issues that shaped our project.
- We have begun to explore ways that we could consolidate committee meetings to one or two set time periods per week or month, with several committees meeting concurrently. This would free up other time periods in the week for faculty study. We are still working on this but the conversation has begun.

- We have also begun very tentatively to talk about the structure of our three faculty divisions – Bible; History, Theology, and Society; and Ministry. Some of the questions we are asking are: Can we use 50% of our divisional meeting time for study together? Could this even take the form of inter-divisional study? Would it be possible to restructure the work of divisions in a way that more accurately reflects our core curricular value of integration? This conversation has a long way to go, but the questions have been asked.
- Our academic dean has announced his intention to retire at the end of the 2008-2009 academic year. The faculty has begun a series of intentional conversations to think together about what skills, expertise, and gifts we might hope for in the next dean. That this is happening may be a sign of a new level of collegiality among the faculty.

Finally, in many of the conversations that have been part of our Lexington Seminar project strategies, the topic of online learning in theological education has come up again and again. This has been an issue that has floated in the air around us for some time, but we have never grasped hold of it directly. We wonder: Is this a new dimension of theological education that Trinity should explore and embrace in order to serve students and the church? What might be its impact on the formation of pastors and leaders for the church? Does it deliver what it promises in that regard? The book *Educating Clergy* and our own experience have reminded us that we do face-to-face theological education and pastoral formation well. Should we focus our energies there, make that our priority, and lift that up to our constituencies as our strength and our commitment? While we do not want to trap ourselves in a false dichotomy, we are beginning to acknowledge a hunch: the seminaries that “dabble” with online distance learning, neither owning it fully nor assigning it to a circumscribed place in the institution’s mission, will be the seminaries that move to the margins in the next decade.

Because Trinity is also currently engaged in a strategic planning process, these questions take on a new immediacy. It is our sense that we cannot answer them until we have a better picture of the possibilities and challenges of online distance learning. We also believe that this exploration would be a fruitful continuation of the ongoing conversations begun with this project. We want to know: How is online distance learning working for those institutions that have developed significant online degree programs? What challenges have they overcome? What difficulties do they continue to face? Is this Trinity’s future, or not? What are the implications for faculty, students, community life, and the church? The answers have a direct impact on so many of the concerns that we have explored as a faculty in the past two years, and get at the heart of who we are and what we understand as our core values.

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Because our faculty retreat cost us less than we had budgeted, we have about \$3000 left from the original Lexington Seminary grant. We propose to use these funds to send several of our faculty members to visit seminaries comparable to Trinity that are using online distance learning in significant ways to deliver theological education. We will consult with them on how they maintain the quality of the teaching/learning process, and

on the impact of online learning on students, especially in relation to their formation as leaders in the church. Of particular concern in relation to this project will be the demands that online learning places on the time and energy of faculty members – the question at the center of our work here.

It is too early to tell how this project has impacted teaching and learning at Trinity. It has had a significant impact on the communal life of the faculty. We talk to and with each other more. We are more reflective together on the nature of our common work in relation to the mission of the seminary and what that means for students, the church, and ourselves. We are more aware that the way we live and work together as a faculty has implications for the larger seminary community. But, we are still in the middle of that conversation. We are finding some answers, and still looking for others. We are asking how the resources of our faith – worship, prayer, Sabbath, and practices of discernment – can help us in this process. We are not all in the same place in regard to all of these matters, yet a new kind of faculty community may be slowly emerging.

V. Sharing the Wisdom

What might we share with other seminaries? Perhaps that because the realities of life and work in theological education today are inevitably stressful, pull us in too many directions, and make too many demands on our time and energy, it is essential to make time to attend to our communal life as a faculty. That time spent talking together about who we are and about what matters to us is not time wasted. That attending to our own formation as teachers and scholars can only benefit our students, and ultimately the church.

Perhaps one incident that illustrates what we have learned regarding the value of time spent together happened at a recent faculty meeting. At an earlier meeting, the faculty had considered what to do about our usual faculty retreat prior to the next academic year. Though no action was taken, there was some question about whether it was necessary to be away overnight again. But at this meeting, the Faculty Concerns Committee, which has responsibility for planning that retreat, brought a clear recommendation that next year's retreat will again be a two-day one. The faculty voted unanimously in support of their motion.

Respectfully submitted,
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