

FINAL REPORT

The Lexington Seminar

Wesley Theological Seminary

June 1, 2006

Statement of the issue and background

After preparation of our narrative and participation in the Northeast Harbor Seminar, our team is more convinced than ever that diversity as both gift and challenge is indeed centrally important to the faithful work of theological education at Wesley and to the churches we serve. Sharing of this conviction with the entire faculty at a September study session made clear that this issue is equally important to our entire faculty community.

We are clear that diversity for us means the encounter and embrace of difference in the body of Christ and includes differences of race, gender, culture, sexual orientation, denominational tradition, theological perspective, age, abilities and disabilities. We are also clear that our efforts will build upon and complement much positive work already done and strong commitments already made—as evidenced in our President’s new strategic vision document, the strong work of a seminary Diversity Committee, the intentional recruitment over many years of a richly diverse faculty and student body, and the committed labors of many individual members of the Wesley community.

Our project will develop and implement a process that seeks to discover and put into practice faithful collegial responses to the following two questions:

1. How can faculty experience and draw upon diversity as a resource for teaching that frames learning in the context of God’s kingdom?
2. How can students encounter and claim diversity as a transformative resource for their ministries and as a manifestation of the body of Christ?

By framing our focal questions in this way, we hope to avoid a common attitude in seminaries and churches that treats diversity primarily as a problem to be overcome, managed or negotiated. Such an attitude rarely produces more than passive tolerance of diversity on the one hand or earnest and urgent response to tensions or conflicts on the other hand.

Goals for the Project

Wesley Theological Seminary has three goals for its Lexington Seminar project.

1. We will conduct an in depth faculty conversation sharing our own experience with diversity as well as our ideas and anxieties around using diversity as a resource for pedagogical transformation in the classroom.
2. We will build on this conversation by engaging, with the help of a consultant, in understanding the dynamics of transformational learning in our diverse seminary community.

3. We will challenge faculty in each curricular area to research, develop, and implement the best practices available for using diversity as a transformative resource in our teaching.

II. Project Design and Resources

Faculty dinners

One of the central design features of our project was series of faculty dinners at our president's home. These were designed to create an informal setting where we could discuss issues directly related to using Wesley's diversity as a resource for teaching in our classrooms. We took up a series of questions designed in advance as a means to stimulate discussion.

The first question was, when did you first begin to develop a consciousness of diversity in your personal experience? This question generated a lot of reflections from the civil rights era. We heard testimonies from colleagues many of us had never heard before.

The second question asked faculty to recount when you recognized that teaching and working with students became a meaningful experience for you in terms of vocational calling. These stories proved to be almost like biblical call stories. We were surprised to learn how strongly many of us felt a calling to teach.

The third question asked us to give an example of an experience when issues of diversity became a teaching moment for you and/or your students. Many dimensions of our diversity emerged here including age, race, class, sexual orientation, and theological diversity.

Finally we asked each other to share how examples of how we use diversity as a resource in our classrooms. Here we heard accounts of how diverse written resources were used, how multiple arts media were used, how diverse student and faculty experiences were used as resources.

Faculty Retreat – August 2005

The expanded Lexington Seminar team met a couple of times to plan for this retreat. The team had a conference call with the facilitator we engaged to help us look at ways we could adopt pedagogical strategies to assist us in moving toward a place in which we could view the multiple diversities at Wesley as a resource for our teaching, rather than as a vexing problem to be solved. During this conference call with the facilitator, we apprised him of what the seminary had already been doing in terms of its curriculum and commitments to embrace diversity as a resource for our teaching. The facilitator encouraged us to engage in a process of self-examination as a community to determine what forms of diversity we have failed to embrace.

In preparation for the retreat, we distributed two articles: one on pedagogical strategies for addressing racial and cultural diversity in the classroom and the other on viewing the classroom as a place of formation. In addition, faculty members were asked to provide a copy of a syllabus used for a core course.

A day and a half of the retreat was devoted to work with the facilitator. He shared with us initial results of the Carnegie Foundation study on Educating Clergy, which stimulated much lively discussion. He led us through a number of exercises that were designed to stimulate discussion around the theme of the retreat. One of the most meaningful exercises was the one in which the faculty was asked to divide into groups of two to discuss their syllabi and approaches to addressing diversity in the classroom. Much energy was generated around these discussions, which enabled faculty members to hear what their colleagues were doing in the classroom; reflect on what their pedagogical philosophy was; hear what joys and anxieties they had experienced in their classrooms, and so on. In the plenary session that followed, we shared successful strategies, and also discussed why we found some strategies worked better than others. We also gave thought to what forms of diversity we had failed to address in our teaching.

As a result of the retreat and, in particular, the exercises that allowed us to envision possibilities for transformation that we had not previously given thought to, there was a sense of excitement, renewal and creative energy that we believe will have impact into the future and we team teach, prepare syllabi, and plan our courses in the future.

Diversity Committee Events

The Diversity Committee has been actively engaged in determining ways in which it could provide resources and support to students, staff, faculty, and administration to meet the challenges that diversity in community brings. In the spring of 2004, just prior to the Lexington Seminar in Maine, the Diversity Committee developed an informational survey for all master's level students to complete on-line. The survey was designed to help them to identify the diversity issues which the student body perceived as a challenge for them in the Wesley community. The response rate was good. The areas the students identified as most challenging for them were race/ethnicity, theological orientation, and sexuality. As a result of the survey, the Committee decided to focus on these three areas for bridge-building events in the 2004-2005 academic year. The Committee wanted these bridge-building events to provide a "toolbox" of skills sets that students and other participants could take with them once they left the sessions. The Committee wanted these presentations to be interactive and hoped they provoke heartfelt discussions. The fall semester was devoted to planning. In the spring of 2005, the Committee sponsored the three events. The Committee hired a facilitator who led the three lunch and dinner sessions to accommodate our commuter students.

The Diversity Committee members were well aware that an hour to one hour and fifteen minutes was not a great deal of time to cover what might be desirable, but they had hoped that these initial sessions would provide enough time to raise the topic, allow for some time of sharing our experiences with regard to the possible challenges of the topic, and offer initial strategies or suggested techniques which students might use to help to initiate and/or facilitate dialogue with others.

The attendance averaged 15 people per session. Faculty tended to outnumber student attendees during the lunch sessions. Attendance patterns were reversed during the dinner sessions. Those who attended the sessions were highly motivated to address these issues openly; however, a good number of students who could have benefited from the discussions declined to attend. (In effect, it was like “preaching to the choir.”) The diversity committee members also concluded that the person they had hired to facilitate these events may not have been the most effective person for what they had hoped to accomplish.

The most “successful” of the three events was the one on race and culture. The success was largely due to the fact that two guest facilitators (an older black man and an older white man who both belong to a church-related group that seeks to address racism) participated with the main facilitator. The guest facilitators, from very different backgrounds and experiences, shared their personal struggles with overcoming the legacy of racism as they became long-time friends. Their personal testimonies created an atmosphere that allowed students (and faculty) to share their own experiences.

From the experience of sponsoring these events, the Committee members learned that they must exercise more care in choosing facilitators that are capable of providing the kind of assistance required to meet their goals. A second thing the members learned, which is related to the first point, is that they must allow more time for these events. The Committee members recognize that they still face the challenge of finding a way of reaching our target population – those students in the community who find diversity most challenging and uncomfortable. Although the Committee members were somewhat disappointed with the outcome of the events, they did feel that these events gave the Wesley community the sense that the seminary is committed to doing more than giving lip service to the claim that diversity is an important value.

The Diversity Committee intended to sponsor more events in the 2005-2006 academic year that would reach a greater segment of the Wesley community. However, personnel changes on the Committee and sabbaticals prevented the members from capitalizing on the momentum we had acquired during the 2004-2005 academic year. Nevertheless, this spring Committee managed to sponsor one event: a belated commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the Montgomery Bus Boycott. The event took place on April 18th. The chair of the Committee arranged to borrow a transit bus similar to the one in which Rosa Parks refused to surrender her seat to a white male passenger in Montgomery, Alabama. An adjunct instructor in drama prepared on short notice a dramatization featuring a number of well-known figures in the struggle for civil rights. Students, staff and faculty participated in several short vignettes. After the brief presentation, the cast and spectators, representing various racial and ethnic backgrounds,

processed hand-in-hand to the waiting bus, singing well-known freedom songs from the civil rights movement. There was room on the bus for every one. Participants enjoyed the freedom of choosing where they wished to sit. Those who participated in the procession spoke of how moving the experience was for them. Many felt that had experienced a sacred moment. The bus remained parked on campus until mid-afternoon so that students could board the bus throughout the day.

Given that the event was put together on short notice, for reasons beyond anyone's control; and given the fact that members of the diversity committee have received positive feedback regarding this event, they have judged the event a success. The Diversity Officer reported the following three insights from this latest event: 1) there is tremendous power in re-enacting significant historical moments that relate to the struggle for justice; 2) the Diversity Committee must find ways of tapping into that power because it can be transformative; and 3) there is receptivity from the community toward the Committee's efforts to find creative ways of raising the consciousness level of the Wesley community.

The diversity committee is committed to continuing to develop more campus activities in the future that will be designed to help Wesley seminary move to new levels in its commitment to diversity and the willingness of community members to cross boundaries for the sake of community. The Committee's goal is to not only participate in the formation of our student body, but that these students will be better equipped to provide leadership within the communities of faith they will serve.

III. Project Results

Learnings

We identified six specific things we learned in our Lexington Seminar project:

First, our faculty has explicitly embraced the concept of our diversity as a resource for teaching and learning instead of seeing diversity as a problem to be solved. Prior to the Lexington Seminar experience we probably would not have had as much of a consensus on this as we now do.

Second, pedagogy is even more central to our faculty deliberations than it was before the project. A large segment of our faculty has participated in Wabash Center related activities so there was already a significant commitment to pedagogical reflection. The Lexington project pushed us to share resources with one another in issues related to diversity. We took advantage of the Wesley faculty's longstanding tradition of regular faculty study time to examine issues related to diversity and teaching.

Third, as a result of the project we have learned to be more comfortable in reaching out for resources and acknowledging the limits of our knowledge. Many of our

senior faculty members are very experimental and entrepreneurial and this has spread across the whole faculty.

Fourth, the faculty is more willing to take risks including being vulnerable to the whole faculty about the need to share resources. We know we cannot honor all forms of our diversity equally in every course we teach. Our faculty maintains a high level of concern for all its members and this is reflected in the collegial nature of our sharing across the diversity within the faculty.

Fifth, we learned that the small dinner format was a mixed experience. On the one hand it started a number of truly interesting personal conversations. On the other hand the limited time format was not conducive to the goal of answering the lengthy and provocative questions we designed to help us see diversity as a teaching resource.

Finally, we recognize that we are not at the beginning of our deliberations on the topic. There is ongoing excitement over sharing syllabi. We see these as moral documents that reflect our moral goals for our classes. They embody moral rules and they display the virtues and habits we want to promote and cultivate in our students.

Followup

In many ways we have realized that our project has no end point. It represents a commitment to an ongoing process. Thus, we are committed to some followup efforts that were already in view at the beginning and we knew would extend beyond the June 1, 2006 reporting deadline.

Fall Faculty Retreat 2006

We have committed ourselves to a plan for our fall faculty retreat that combines the focus of our Lexington Seminar project with new interests growing out of our participation in a Wabash Center workshop on the Educating Clergy publication from the Carnegie Foundation study conducted by Charles Foster and his team. The inclusion of the faculty assignment for this retreat will make its focus clear.

Faculty Assignment for Retreat

One of the main questions out of the book Educating Clergy by Chuck Foster and his team as developed in the Wabash seminars held this spring is this: To what degree do we connect the God we teach to the God we worship? The faith or spirituality we teach to the faith or spirituality we practice? There are a variety of responses to these questions. We want to couple these challenging questions with the generally affirmed request in an earlier faculty meeting that we share syllabi, particularly for the required and foundational courses.

1. Revise a syllabus for a course you teach in light of the questions posed below. If possible this should be a course that meets a degree requirement, and it need not be a course you are teaching this fall.
 - a. How does your syllabus reflect your own awareness of diversity?
 - b. How does your syllabus reflect your own theology, spirituality or experience of God?
2. Since only a limited amount can show in a syllabus, share your own reflections on how your changing views of diversity and your ongoing experience with God are reflected in your teaching practices. What are your views on the appropriate degree to which we should share ourselves in our teaching?
3. Send this syllabus and a 2 or 3 paragraph response to question 2 to the Dean's office by August 4. We will duplicate these and circulate them to the faculty in advance of the retreat so that our time can be spent discussing rather than reading or hearing merely descriptive reports from everyone.

Religion in the Public Square Project

The way we are implementing a modest grant from the Carpenter Foundation has been shaped by our outcomes from our Lexington project. One of the strategic goals of our seminary is to connect Wesley more closely with Washington public life. We believe that seminary students should be shaped by the context in which they are being trained. As part of this commitment we are designing programming around two annual themes, global poverty and race. We will offer resources such as speakers, brown bag lunches, elective reading courses as well as promoting our existing seminar, the National Capital Semester for Seminarians to help equip students to promote the examination of these issues in parish settings. We will also be developing new courses such as one on public theology for congregations.