

THE LEXINGTON SEMINAR FINAL PROJECT SUMMARY

Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond
Richmond, Virginia
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I. Issue and Context

In the fall of 2002, the faculty of BTSR began the process of curriculum revision. A similar process in 1999-2000 had been a difficult one, ending with a new curriculum but also with sharp divisions within the faculty, and between some individuals on the faculty and the administration. Those who had participated in the earlier review entered the new process with caution, but the Dean was optimistic. He and four of the 13 faculty members had come to BTSR since the last curriculum review. He believed that by going slowly, discussions about shared goals could lead to consensus on the changes that needed to be made. Although the faculty was grateful for the attention to process, many were frustrated at the slow pace of progress. It seemed that the group could get only so far in discussing the goals of the M.Div. or the nature of a curriculum to meet those goals, and then they would hit barriers that were difficult to name and work through.

In the late spring of 2003, BTSR received an invitation to participate in the Lexington Seminar in 2004. The BTSR administration received the invitation as both a privilege and an opportunity. This project seemed like a great way to get help with the curriculum review process.

BTSR's narrative proposed for the Lexington Seminar starts with the very decision making process involved in ensuring BTSR's participation in the Lexington Seminar. According to the narrative, the President and the former Dean thought it to be a good idea to participate in the Lexington Seminar, which they saw as a good opportunity to get help with the imminent curriculum review process. This prospect was presented briefly at the May 2003 faculty meeting and again at the faculty retreat in August 2003.

After the director of the Lexington Seminar presented the full program to the faculty at the first fall faculty meeting in 2003, a hefty debate ensued, and the President and Dean's proposal was met with quite a bit of resistance. The decision by the administration to participate in the Lexington Seminar opened up old wounds where other decisions were made without the faculty's input. With regard to this issue, the faculty felt as though they did not have input in or a vote on curricular issues that affected them all.

The result of some of these unilateral decisions was the formation of a tension-filled environment where people did not fully trust each other, which made

already difficult tasks such as curriculum review especially harrowing. The writers of the original narrative started to see a pattern emerging. They realized that much of the distrust and anger at unilateral decision-making went back to BTSR's founding moment when many of the SBC institutions experienced a fundamentalist take-over that resulted in many of the faculty losing their jobs. As a result, faculty members at BTSR continued to look with suspicion on the actions of trustees and administration.

The writers of the original narrative thought that in order for anything productive to be accomplished such as revisiting the curriculum, the faculty needed to find the space where they actually talked and in the process learn to trust one another. They saw the Lexington Seminar as an excellent opportunity for BTSR, with the help of experienced facilitators, to engage in meaningful conversation about BTSR's culture and identity. The writers of the narrative hoped that by working through some core issues such as the way faculty and administration make decisions, issues of communication between faculty and administration, and faculty governance, they would be able to work toward a greater sense of trust and understanding among faculty and between faculty and administration. They realized that they would not make much progress on key issues such as curriculum review before these issues were resolved.

According to the narrative, at the next faculty meeting, after receiving more information from the Dean, the faculty finally did decide to pursue the opportunities presented by the Lexington Seminar. The faculty, who now felt more invested in the project, decided that they wanted to focus on the issues of BTSR's identity and culture as set out before (it should be noted that the President was not at this meeting and would have preferred that the topic for the Lexington Seminar would rather center around curricular issues).

II. Project Design

Taking the faculty's advice to heart, the BTSR team organized our annual faculty retreat to give the rest a hint of what we had experienced in Maine. Instead of meeting in an institutional setting, we chose to meet in a very comfortable home and served lobster and blueberry pie for lunch. Using a time-line to show important dates in BTSR's development, we told stories of what brought us to BTSR and how the institution had changed over time. Since our President is now the only one of us to have been here since the seminary began, faculty asked him questions that led him to tell stories that, for many newer faculty members, were an invaluable orientation to the institution. In that relaxed setting, we talked over ideas for a Lexington Seminar-style retreat, and decided that we would like to focus our conversation around who we are as a faculty and how we understand ministry.

It is helpful to place the seminary in context. The BTSR M.Div. curriculum is organized around three key concepts: a focus on the spiritual formation of the

minister; a focus on global missions that confronts students with the needs of the world and immerses them in what God is doing through Christians globally; and a focus on the local congregation and its ministries. This third pillar, “congregationally-focused theological education,” means that in every course students are required to explore how the content and methods of that part of the curriculum impacts ministry in a local congregation. We proposed to make this third pillar the focus of extended conversation at our retreat. We believe that by talking about our own understanding of congregational ministry, we will learn much about ourselves and our identity as faculty. It is central to our stated mission; it impacts teaching and learning across the whole curriculum; and it is a central feature of how new faculty are hired and how current faculty are evaluated.

Our goals for the project included:

- To increase trust and improve communications among faculty (and between faculty and the Dean and President) by enjoying times of fruitful conversation around an important issue.
- To increase trust and improve communications by enjoying times of relaxed dining and recreation in a very nice setting.
- To clarify how we understand ministry in a local congregation; how we differ from each other and from our students on this issue; and how and where we agree with each other and our students on this issue.
- To reflect on how we can improve faculty communication and decision-making.
- To set goals, possibly including an annual Maine-style retreat, for building and maintaining strong faculty community and good faculty communications.

III. Resources Used in Developing and Implementing the Project

Each faculty member completed the Profiles of Ministry (POM) Stage 1 Survey. POM 1 involves a casebook with 23 cases, each with multiple responses to “what would you do” or “do you think the minister should” types of questions. This was followed by a 45-minute taped interview that posed a mix of hypothetical situations and asked questions about the minister’s understanding of himself/herself. Each participant received a personal inventory that reported his or her own tendencies in ministry.

POM 1 is given nationally to first-year seminary students, including our own entering classes for the past five years. Thus, by the time of the retreat, we had data for ourselves as well as comparative data: our own student body, students in our denomination nationally, and the whole universe of POM participants.

After we received the results of the Survey, but before the retreat, a facilitator trained in interpreting the POM conducted individual sessions with the faculty to help each of us understand the categories and interpret the results. The faculty

was asked to give a short reflection on what the survey revealed or where the results surprised them.

The BTSR faculty engaged a member of the Lexington Seminar consultant team to guide us in our discussions at the retreat. We retreated August 28-30, 2005, at The Homestead in Hot Springs, Virginia and used a Maine-style format, alternating work times with recreation and wonderful meals, with plenty of time for conversation.

At the end of the retreat, we asked our consultant to help us consolidate what we had learned and set goals for better communication and decision-making for the coming year.

IV. Project Results

The faculty retreat enabled the faculty to explore many of the values we hold in common about faculty life at BTSR. These values include freedom, a shared theological outlook, confidence in one another, a commitment to excellence, a respect for diversity in all its manifestations, a commitment to prepare people for leadership in the church, and a sense of being a “fellow learner” with our students in a community of learners.

The faculty identified a set of challenges that it faces. These challenges pointed to the fact that:

- We are trying to create a culture of trust
- We are unaware of a presidential succession plan or our responsibility as faculty in that succession plan
- We will identify consistent and appropriate ways to involve faculty in decision-making
- We are committed to become better informed about BTSR as a system and develop a greater understanding of our role in the seminary
- We must reclaim a truly prophetic, bold voice on issues that matter while remaining civil
- We should strive to be globally conscious and inclusive.

The retreat provided the faculty with an opportunity to pose critical questions that it is seeking to answer. These questions include:

- Who will we be?
- How can we take more responsibility for identifying how and when we participate in decision-making at the seminary?
- What understanding do we have of the “historic Baptist values?” Do these various understandings reflect how we differ theologically?
- How do we model for our students our theological differences without sacrificing mutual respect?

It is not feasible to address all the challenges and every question raised by the faculty retreat. However, some strategic issues are being addressed. The seminary's strategic planning process has provided a mechanism for dealing with some of these critical concerns.

The strategic plan was not a direct outgrowth of the Lexington seminar, but it was heavily influenced by the same concerns for following good process that was central to our Lexington Seminar case. A former trustee officer and current Vice Provost at Virginia's largest educational institution directed the strategic plan. Great pains were taken to include all of the major stakeholders in the life of the seminary. The steering committee was made up of representatives from faculty, students, staff, trustees, alumni, donors, and denominational entities. Each of those groups participated in lengthy surveys, focus groups, and interviews. As a result the seminary received the most extensive feedback from our publics we have ever gotten. As an example, the Baptist General Association of Virginia provided statewide polling of attitudes about the seminary from their member churches. In like manner the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship provided nationwide data concerning expectations of theological education as well as evaluation of BTSR.

As an illustration of the parallel concerns of the strategic plan and the Lexington Seminar case, one of the four major commitments stated in the strategic plan is a "commitment to a nurturing and stimulating community." Specifically the goal states: "to encourage respectful, continual, and open communications which contribute to intentional community building within and beyond the seminary campus." Relationships within this community are described as "intentional," "respectful," "perpetual," and "accessible."

One of the key points of stress mentioned by the faculty at their retreat related to the Lexington Seminar was an uneasiness about the future of the seminary at a time of presidential transition. Fears were voiced about a loss of identity and a forgetting of our foundational principles. The faculty group voiced these same concerns as they met to discuss issues related to the strategic plan. As a result, the strategic plan begins with the seminary's recommitment to its mission statement, to its institutional principles, and to its founding covenant.

Neither the strategic plan, nor a succession plan as a part of the strategic plan, is a finished document. They are still very much in process. Both documents, however, are beginning to show intentional preparation for a transition in leadership. The timing of the transition is not certain, but soon, and keyed to the successful completion of our current capital campaign. The appropriate relationship between the outgoing and incoming President has been discussed but certainly not settled. A search process for a new President has only been discussed to the extent of affirming the participation of faculty and staff in that search process.

The strategic plan is scheduled to come before trustees at their October meeting for its final approval. It is to the seminary's advantage that the strategic plan has been instituted and led by trustees. It is also to the seminary's advantage to have this process running concurrently with the Lexington Seminar.

Another positive outcome initiated by the Lexington Seminar is a separate grant received from Wabash center directed toward the enhancement of teaching and learning.

In March 2006, Wabash Center Conference on Theological Teaching and Learning three representatives of our faculty attended the "Educating Clergy: Wabash Center Conference on Theological Teaching and Learning" in Chicago. In preparation for the conference we read *Educating Clergy: Teaching Practices and Pastoral Imagination*, Charles R. Foster, et al (part of a series of research projects on "Preparations for The Professions" by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching). This resource was particularly helpful to us in explaining the link between institutional culture and identity and what actually is taught in our seminary.

One of the rewarding experiences of the Educating Clergy Conference was the time the representatives of the respective schools spent together in dialogue, talking about what energized us in our own teaching, as well as the challenges we faced in our task of educating clergy. Through our conversations we discovered shared passions, at the same time also recognizing that our disagreements offered us opportunities for growth and mutual enrichment. In light of this experience, the participants from BTSR agreed that as a faculty we do not spend enough time talking about issues such as what we actually teach our students, how to become more effective teachers, who our students are, and what common vision we share at BTSR, and the lack of communication. These echo some of the same issues that were present in the initial narrative proposed for the Lexington seminar.

In the final session of the conference, we were offered several options for funding by the Wabash Center for the enhancement of our task of educating clergy. As representatives to the Educating Clergy conference, we thought it might be a good idea to use this award to initiate dialogue among the faculty outside our regular faculty meetings on issues relating to our task of cultivating a pastoral imagination in our students. If these conversations prove to be fruitful, we may decide as a faculty that we are interested in pursuing further options for funding.

The three representatives of our faculty who attended the Wabash Center Conference on Theological Teaching and Learning recommended, and other faculty members agreed to organize a series of ten lunch meetings in the fall 2006 semester with the distinctive purpose of dialogue, centering on, but not limited to the following topics:

- What do we teach our students? A good starting place may be for the various areas to share their syllabi of core courses and talk us through the logic. It would be particularly important to share what excites us about our discipline, as well as highlighting content and skills we deem to be crucial to our task of cultivating a pastoral imagination.
- How do we teach? What pedagogical principles do we follow? Which of these strategies do we find helpful? What challenges do we experience?
- What expectations live among our students? How do the diverse socio-cultural locations of our students impact the way they learn? What about factors such as gender or age?

We see these forthcoming conversations initiated by the Wabash grant as a positive outcome that is directly related to the Lexington Seminar. First, the proposal for this discussion series was submitted to the faculty well before the faculty meeting, and accompanied by some individual conversations with various faculty members. At the faculty meeting where the faculty had to approve this idea in order for the Dean to apply for this grant, the faculty was unanimous in their support of this endeavor and very much appreciative of its objectives. It does seem that we have grown in our ability to trust each other and to communicate more effectively. Second, the topic of these ten conversations will focus on curricular matters, i.e. what skills and content we deem to be essential in our task of educating clergy. It seems again as if we have made some progress, i.e., after facing our identity and culture, now being able to move to important issues of curriculum.

V. Sharing the Wisdom

The Lexington Seminar experience taught us a great deal about theological education and other theological institutions. It was reassuring to discover that other schools seemingly were quite different from our own, had experienced many of the same issues and challenges that we face. Many of Lexington Seminar participants from those schools were able to share with us their challenges and attempted solutions to problems similar to those we are dealing with.

We have a greater understanding of the complexity of organizational dynamics that impact various components of institutional life. In addition, we have developed a greater appreciation for system theory and its premise that the past impacts the present and the future.

The faculty identified its highest wishes for the seminary. They include:

- Take regular time for talk and prayer
- Celebrate our diversity
- Invest in more faculty and staff
- Share our theological views and what we do in the classroom

- Develop creative uses of faculty outside the classroom
- Achieve Financial sufficiency
- Nurture and strengthen our relationship with congregations
- Be bold and more courageous as an institution
- Find better, more consistent ways to nurture faculty and students as whole persons
- Be more purposeful about meaningful interaction
- Become more diverse ethnically and more inclusive
- Maintain emphasis on academic achievement
- Seek opportunities to feel at home with one another at the “soul level.”

Finally, the faculty made a commitment to pursue conversations by:

- Finding time and space to encourage each other’s scholarship
- Cultivating conversations with the President
- Conversing about issues that matter
- Creating open free time to share who we are with each other
- Pay attention to and build on the progress we are making
- Worshiping together as we share with each other and with students what our faith means to us.

We would like to express our thanks for the opportunity for the faculty at the Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond to be given the time and space in lovely settings to work on some challenging issues through the Lexington Seminar. We were the beneficiaries of the wisdom from colleagues at several different institutions and for that we are very grateful.

(Parts of this report have been taken from earlier submissions to the Lexington Seminar.)