

• SAMUEL ESCOBAR •

What Is the Ministry toward Which We Teach?

Are seminaries educating students for Christian ministry in the world as it is or the world as it once was? Such is the pedagogical problem repeatedly identified in the narratives of The Lexington Seminar. As we examine the role of seminaries in preparing students for ministry, this problem should be recognized not only as pedagogical but as theological and missional as well. It is a problem that has taken on dramatic urgency because of the sociological and cultural transitions that the United States and its churches are experiencing at this point in history. These transitions can be identified in four related yet independent developments in international culture.

First, a fairly homogeneous society dominated by Western European cultural patterns is transitioning into a society significantly changed by the cultural patterns of ethnic minorities. Second, a Protestant era defined by denominational traditions is transitioning into a postdenominational era in which many different independent churches and movements are flourishing. Third, a society shaped by the culture of modernity is transitioning into one shaped by postmodern cultural trends. Fourth, a religious establishment that was once segmented into Protestant-Catholic-Jewish is transitioning into a pluralistic, post-Christendom society in which the Judeo-Christian tradition is losing power and relevance. As I revisit the nature and content of Christian ministry, I will refer to these transitions as the new context for ministry.

MINISTRY REVISITED

The American church scene has been the center of an ongoing discussion about the nature and form of Christian ministry, and the questions formulated in the past show some of the same sense of puzzlement and will to change found in the narratives of The Lexington Seminar. A helpful example is the situation described by James Smart in his book *The Rebirth of Ministry*. Although published more than forty years ago, Smart's book maintains a remarkable cogency for the contemporary scene. Smart summarizes the study of theological education led by H. Richard Niebuhr during a decade in the 1950s (Niebuhr and Williams 1956; Niebuhr, Williams, and Gustafson 1956; Niebuhr, Williams, and Gustafson 1957) by writing, "From their sifting of evidence from ministers and laymen and from our theological seminaries, they assert unequivocally that at the heart of the problem is an inability from our churches to say what a minister is intended to be" (Smart 1960, 17). Smart reminds his readers that the medieval church had a clear-cut picture of the minister as the director of souls, the Reformation church saw the minister as a preacher of the Word, and for Pietism the minister was an evangelist. By contrast, he says, "in twentieth century Protestantism no such unitary and unifying principle exists" (18).

Smart offers a long list of expected roles that show the confusion of perceptions among churches in the 1960s. "What is a minister?" he asked, and he offered the following possible answers: an evangelist, a preacher, a priest, a religious administrator, a social reformer, a species of amateur psychiatrist, an educator (17). Some of these perceptions remain in our present discussions, but each of them can be qualified within the context of current social conditions. A minister is an evangelist, yes, but now we have specialists, such as television preachers and campus crusade workers; a minister is a preacher, yes, but nowadays people seem to ask for storytellers; a minister is a priest, but who wants to be a priest after so many scandals? And how will a minister compete with those who have specialized MBAs in church administration or with social reformers who are opposed to explicit religious involvement in social reform? Several decades of social analysis have made us aware that other institutions are now providing many of the services that the church was once expected to provide.

THE MINISTRY OF JESUS CHRIST

Theological education was established to produce a certain type of result according to a well-established tradition that was based on the well-defined roles that ministers once played in society. At present we face a new situation which is partially the result of the sociocultural transitions I mentioned earli-

er. The challenges we face now give us a unique opportunity to perceive anew the *mission* of the church and the vision of *ministry* by returning to the sources of our faith. Smart's proposal still makes sense, but we must contextualize it within the frame of the twenty-first century: "The ministry into which we enter is the ministry of Jesus Christ. We are not free to determine its nature as we will; its nature has already been determined for us by his life, death and resurrection and by the work of the Spirit in the shaping of the Apostolic ministry. That is in part the significance of the line that the second-century church drew around the canonical books of Scripture" (20).

A helpful schema to explore the ministry of Jesus Christ comes from the Reformed tradition that arranged the biblical material around the vision of Jesus as prophet, priest, and king (more recently understood as pastor). This schema allows us to see the ministry of Jesus, as we find it in the Gospels, within the context of its roots in the Old Testament. Smart follows it by exploring those roots but showing at the same time the uniqueness of Jesus' ministry (22–28). It was a ministry in which there was no separation between his teaching, his actions, and his being as a person. It was an itinerant ministry going out to those to whom he ministered, looking for his lost sheep. It was a proclamation of God's reign (or kingdom), and he himself moved by the Spirit of God was the king. Central to his ministry was his forgiveness of sins, which accomplished his purpose of restoring human beings to the true life in God. His ministry took the form of service, and he interpreted his ministry with Old Testament images of servanthood. Summing up, "All aspects of Jesus' ministry come to their climactic expression in the cross. Strangely, it was in his dying that his ministry was fulfilled with the profoundest power. Again we meet the oneness of gospel, ministry and person" (28).

Jesus' ministry in the training of his disciples also throws light on the nature of the apostolic ministry. Smart explores in depth the relationship between Jesus and the disciples that establishes the continuity between his ministry and theirs:

When Jesus trained the twelve it was not for some secondary ministry different in kind from his own; it was for participation with him in the only ministry he knew. But before they could share his ministry with him there had to be a sharing on a yet deeper and more decisive level (29).

There are key moments in the synoptic Gospels in which this training process is evident, and especially in the Fourth Gospel the teaching and prayers of Jesus are explicit about the continuity between his ministry and the ministry to which he called the disciples. As Smart says, "John's Gospel dwells on this again and again, that the life of God, which was incarnate in Jesus Christ, became the life also of his disciples, and that the Spirit of God, which dwelt in

all his fullness in Jesus Christ, took up his dwelling place in the disciples and created Christ afresh in them” (29). More recently, Justo González, a scholar who has modeled how to place scholarship at the service of ministry, has offered us a rich meditation on the spiritual life of the minister that dwells in the teaching of the Gospels. It is the kind of book that one would categorize as spirituality, but it is a theologically based spirituality, forged in the experience of a theological educator. In the introduction to his book, González proposes to show how Jesus’ “ministry calls our ministry into being and how his ministry shapes ours.” But he emphasizes his intention to go beyond mere intellectual exploration when he says that “we are not seeking merely to learn how to imitate Jesus. It is much more a matter of probing the depths of what it means to be in Christ, to be transformed by Christ and to have Christ formed in us and living in us” (González 1995, 8).

The persistent effort to establish continuity with the ministry of Jesus Christ as it was developed in the life of the apostolic church has been the source of a formulation of ministry that uses a set of Greek words—*martyria*, *koinonia*, *leitourgia*, *kerygma*, *didache*, *diakonia*, and *propheteia*—that have become familiar to those who reflect upon the mission of the church in the world.¹

As a community of believers in Jesus Christ, the very presence of the church in the world is a reminder of the coming of Christ that was history, marked history, and gives meaning to history; in that sense the church is a living testimony—*martyria*. The way of being the church in the world is to be a gathered fellowship, a cohesive community bound by love in Christ—*koinonia*. A unique and distinctive activity of this gathered fellowship is worship—*leitourgia*—a response to God’s revelation as Creator, Savior, and empowering Spirit. The gathering of the community is made possible by the proclamation of God’s word in Christ—*kerygma*—followed by instruction in the Word—*didache*. The gathered fellowship is marked by the same vocation of service—*diakonia*—to the needs of human beings in the church and outside the church, the kind of service that was the way of life and death for Jesus Christ. More recently, as the ministry of Jesus himself was rediscovered, the centrality of God’s reign in his self-understanding, preaching, teaching, and healing has been recovered and with it the relevance of the courageous denunciation of evil when God’s reign is proclaimed—*propheteia*.

Each one of these words points to attitudes and activities that constitute the why, what, and how of ministry. A helpful summary from Groome (1991, 331–332) serves well here by way of synthesis:

The *modus operandi* of Christian ministry should be appropriate to the overarching purpose of God’s reign and effective in the tasks of evangelizing, preaching and teaching Christian Story/Vision; in building up inclusive and witnessing communities of Jesus’ disciples, of enabling communities to worship God and to celebrate the sacraments of

encounter with the Risen Christ; and of rendering personal and social/political service for the welfare of all and the integrity of creation.

Such is the ministry toward which we teach, which must now be formulated and developed within the context of the cultural and ecclesiastical transitions of our time. These transitions are the setting within which our reflection takes place, and they are already affecting the daily life of faculty and students in seminaries. It is evident from the narratives of The Lexington Seminar that the characteristics of the new context for ministry are now shaping the social landscape and the pace of life of theological seminaries. The way these communities respond to the new situations will model future ministerial praxis.

I now explore in more detail and with due regard for society's current transitional context the components of ministry I have just outlined, placing particular emphasis on *koinonia*, *kerygma*, *martyria*, *leitourgia*, and *diakonia*.²

KOINONIA IN THE GLOBAL VILLAGE

The presence of minorities and international students is one of the ways in which seminaries experience the reality of the global village. The Two-Thirds World has come to the United States, and it resides not just in the heart of our cities but amid the green lawns of suburbia and on the shaded streets of small-town America. The two-thirds church is no longer a distant reality described by foreign missionaries. It is right here, down the street, in the seminary: multicultural, multiethnic, multilingual realities from the global village. The narratives of The Lexington Seminar dramatize some of the disconcerting characteristics of diversity in seminary communities: Japanese students who do not understand English adequately, African students who find critical approaches to the biblical text intolerable, single mothers who feel marginalized because their needs are not taken into account. Add to that the presence of students from Pentecostal and independent churches that until a few years ago were at the margins of Protestant theological education but may now be becoming the new mainline denominations. How is *koinonia* fostered in such a diverse company?

When the current student generation graduates, a growing number of ministry situations will have the characteristics of the global village. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when massive immigration brought people from diverse cultures to the United States, ministry in many American mainline churches made a conscious effort to "Americanize" the newcomers, to assimilate them into middle-class Anglo-Saxon life and values. Today, however, the scenario is different. Several references to contextualization in the narratives are evidence that seminary communities are grappling now with the issues that in the past were associated with global mission, with the work of the

church in missionary territories where it was not so easy to impose a dominant cultural pattern. A ministry committed to *koinonia* will have to deal with cultural diversity. Such a ministry will require its practitioners to scrutinize their own cultural presuppositions, be open to the cultural differences of others, and yet still be willing and able to strengthen the fundamental commitments of the church.

A missiologist who has done much work on diversity, from a church growth perspective, is George Hunter III, who says that the cultural barrier between churches and unchurched people is the largest single cause of the decline of European Christianity and a bigger problem for mainline American Christianity. Hunter poses a dramatic question, "The U.S.A. is a vast secular mission field with many cultures and subcultures. Are we imaginative enough and compassionate enough to sponsor and unleash many forms of indigenous Christianity in this land?" (Hunter 2001, 105). He thinks that the so-called apostolic congregations that are proliferating in North America are responding to this missionary challenge. His choice of some well-known mega-churches may not be the answer I would choose, but I think his question is the right one to ask. A church that claims to be an embodiment of the new, a sign of the kingdom, must come to terms with this new global reality, and its ministers, whose responsibility is to cooperate with God's Spirit as he fashions a new church, must be educated to fulfill their task in this new situation.

THE TEXT OF *KERYGMA* IN THE CONTEXT OF POSTMODERNITY

Preaching and teaching are key elements of the Protestant concept of ministry. The Reformation brought back the conviction that the very existence and life of the church came from the creative power of the Word. It was not the church that gave birth to Scripture; it was God's Word in the apostolic preaching, recorded later in Scripture, that gave birth to the church. If the church lived by the Word, then the ministry of the Word was at the heart of Christian ministry. Thus, Protestantism revolutionized theological education, placing the study of Scripture at the heart of the curriculum. This explains why, as Protestantism developed within the setting of modern culture, Protestants came to emphasize *true doctrine* or *reasonable belief* as a mark of the church (although important sectors among them have not fully perceived the value of *ritual and symbol* in human life and communication). Nevertheless, within the structures of the culture of modernity, rigorous seminary training enabled theological students to take a parable of Jesus, one of those masterpieces of narrative, and generate from it a sermon that had the structure of a philosophical essay. One could say that the curriculum in traditional theological education reflects this bias toward preaching and teaching as the most fundamental activities of ministry, which address especially the mind and the rational abilities of the hearers.

The attention we now pay to narrative as a form of communication is evidence that something is happening to the predominance of rationality that was characteristic of modernity. The term “postmodernity” describes a cultural atmosphere in which we can identify an open or veiled rejection of the ideologies, worldviews, and values that were shaped by the Enlightenment and which constituted our concept of modernity. We might describe a postmodern culture as one in which there is a predominance of feeling and a revolt against reason as seen in such phenomena as the search for ever more sophisticated forms of pleasure. Sports and popular artistic shows take the shape of religious celebration and replace church services as a way to provide relief from the drudgery of routine work and duty.

Ministry within the context of a postmodern culture will have to pay attention to new elements of content and style. The whole process of communication that includes preaching and teaching in church will need to address not only the reasoning ability of people but also their imagination, their feelings, their ability to grasp symbols, and their need for belonging. Postmodernity motivates us to revise our view of the human and the minister in a more holistic way by being ourselves whole persons. In the past, being familiar with people’s various learning patterns was almost solely within the professional purview of educational specialists. Today, theological educators must prepare ministers who are aware of the various learning patterns in postmodern culture and who can conduct their ministry accordingly.

As to the question of content, take for instance an important aspect of postmodernity, such as the exaltation of the body. Postmodern culture depicts the body in all forms and shapes and offers thousands of products to beautify, perfume, modify, improve, and perfect the body, even to the point of promising ways to overcome the inroads of natural decay. There are products, methods, and stimuli for enhancing physical pleasure in all its forms. This search for pleasure has become a mark of contemporary life that, coupled with the hopelessness brought by the collapse of ideologies, becomes pure and simple hedonism. Ministry in this situation requires a rediscovery of references and perspectives on human materiality and pleasure in the sources of our faith. The text of Scripture may have surprising angles as we read it within this new context.

MARTYRIA IN A POST-CHRISTENDOM SITUATION

Although the United States has never had a nationally established church, most churchgoing Americans have, until recently, assumed that they lived in a nation with a Christian social order, a social order in dramatic contrast with that of faraway mission territories. Within a Christian social order—call it Christendom—the church is a privileged entity because it fills a recognized role, and ministers enjoy social acceptance and privileges. Christendom developed

150 •WHAT IS THE MINISTRY TOWARD WHICH WE TEACH?•

after the marriage of church and state that came with the conversion of emperor Constantine. “The church was blended into a half-civil, half-religious society, *Christendom*. It has covered a whole civilization with its authority, inspired a politic, and has become an essentially Western reality” (Mehl 1970, 67). Christendom presupposed the predominance of Christianity in Western societies and a certain degree of influence of Christian ideas and principles on the social life of nations. However, the West is moving into a new situation that can be described as post-Christendom, one in which Christianity is losing its privileged status because of secularization, numerical decline of mainline churches, loss of spiritual vigor, privatization of religious commitment, and the growing presence of other religious traditions. This phenomenon has not affected Christianity in the United States to the same degree that it has in Europe, but it is certainly at work in American society.

In this new situation, Christians cannot expect society to facilitate through social mechanisms the kind of life that reflects the qualities of Christian character and ethics, nor can ministers expect as much as formerly in terms of recognition and status. The Christian stance in the West today has to become a missionary stance in which the quality of Christian life goes “against the stream.” Two Methodist ministers and scholars, Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon (1989) have studied this situation and outlined the kind of response it requires from churches and ministers. The title of their book, *Resident Aliens*, describes well the response required from Christians who want to live their faith in American society. The same qualities that were required of the pioneers who planted Christianity in mission fields are now required from the Christians who stay at home and want to be faithful witnesses of Jesus Christ. Coming from a life of missionary experience in Asia, Rosemary Dowsett (2001, 449) has said it forcefully, “Neither the Lord Jesus himself nor the early church regarded minority status as abnormal. It was only with the advent of Christendom that the church was seduced into believing that she should exercise majority control by force, not faith (in parts of Europe we are still paying the price for that wrong turning).” Missionaries have learned and have been inspired by the way in which Christians live their lives in a hostile environment when they are a tiny minority. Christians living in the West can learn much from Christians who every day must practice their faith in traditional missionary fields.

During worship at Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Philadelphia I am often reminded of the environment in which we teach when I hear and am touched by the realities of intercessory prayer. While mainline, middle-class students have asked us to pray for their grades and their sick aunts, students from poorer backgrounds have asked us to pray for the lady who directs Sunday school in their church, because her grandson has gone into prison for

drug-pushing. Such moments are today an important part of the formative process of ministers as disciple-makers in years to come.

***LEITOURGIA* IN THE CONTEXT OF THE NEW RELIGIOSITY**

One of the tenets of “enlightened” modernity was the idea that religion was in the process of waning away. Christian thinkers were confronted in cultural circles by a hostile rationalism nourished by the three “fathers of suspicion”—Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud—who announced the end of religion. Some theologians wrote in praise of the advent of secularity, and in many quarters ministry did indeed become secularized, losing the spiritual source of the divine call. But now, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, we live in a world in which religions have multiplied to the point that sociologists are now describing the desecularization of the world (Berger 1999).

From the perspective of Christian ministry, the return of an attitude of openness to the sacred and the mysterious could be interpreted as a sign of improvement. In many cases this new attitude has allowed Christians to demonstrate through prayer, song, and drama a freer and less inhibited expression of Christian faith. But Christians are also confronted with a new and more subtle challenge. Ministers find themselves engaged in dialogue with people whose language is strangely similar to church language—“joy in the heart,” a feeling of “self-realization,” a sense of “peace and harmony,” a feeling of “goodwill toward all human beings.” However, if a Christian minister wants to deal with specific issues such as suffering, death, compassion, final hope, failure, and sin, the hollowness of this new religious mood often becomes apparent. Furthermore, when such traditional themes are expressed, hostility sometimes develops against what is considered Christian exclusivism and intolerance.

The new attitude toward religion and the proliferation of religious practices has to be understood as part of the revolt against modernity. The modern ideologies of indefinite progress and social utopia were actually myths that attracted and mobilized the masses to action. Their failure to materialize for large portions of the world’s population have brought awareness of a vacuum and disillusionment about the ability of human reason to give meaning to life and provide answers to deep existential questions. This awareness is at the root of the search for spiritual alternatives, for a contact with the occult, for an ability to handle mystery, for a connection with extrarational forces that may influence the course of human events, both in individual lives as well as in communities and nations. The new uninhibited forms of religiosity in American life run the gamut from Afro-Caribbean “santería” to self-destructive messianic sects, from elegant New Age types of spirituality to racist fundamentalisms committed to white supremacy.

Within this new context of intensified religiosity, Christian ministry provides the gift and discipline of discernment. In the days of the New Testament, the gospel of Jesus Christ confronted not only the challenges of Greek philosophy and Roman politics but also the theological and pastoral questions posed by the mystery religions that pervaded the worldview and ritual practices of popular culture. Mystery religions in the first century promised cleansing to deal with guilt, security to face fear of evil, power over fate, union with gods through orgiastic ecstasy, and immortality (Green 1970). The apostolic message developed in the New Testament responded to similar aspirations of the human heart but was based on the person and work of Jesus Christ and the presence of the Holy Spirit. The time has come in which ministry needs to rediscover the rich streams of spirituality that have always been available to sustain the life of the church.

DIAKONIA IN A POSTCAPITALIST SOCIETY

We were once accustomed to thinking of massive social change as something characteristic of countries in Africa or Latin America, but the United States is also experiencing a social revolution that analyst Peter Drucker (1994) has described as the coming of the postcapitalist society, in which “knowledge workers” are replacing industrial workers. Significant changes are affecting the lives of people because of the disappearance of old communities, such as family, village, and parish. Neither government nor the employing organizations, the classic “two sectors” that hold power in the postcapitalist United States, are able to cope with the effects of this massive social change. Such effects give place to what Drucker calls the “social tasks of the knowledge society.”

As a committed Christian who knows well the potential of Christian faith to mobilize active compassion expressed in service, Drucker places the agenda of assuming social tasks in the hands of what he calls “the third sector” in American society. This is constituted by churches and by myriad voluntary organizations that he calls “para-churches,” because they have modeled themselves after the nonprofit pattern established by churches. He assigns to this “social sector” a twofold task: to “create human health and well-being” and to “create citizenship.” Drucker’s scheme presupposes a reserve of volunteerism that is typically American and has unequivocal Protestant roots, though its contemporary manifestations may be secular in outlook and intention.

Thus, a new element has been added with a sense of urgency to the agenda of Christian ministry. Even denominations and churches that in the past were critical of the social agendas embraced by mainline churches are now becoming engaged in new forms of *diakonia*. It is well known that ministers among ethnic minorities have been bound to become involved in different forms of

social activism. The challenge is becoming more generalized today. By placing service within the larger conception of ministry, churches will avoid falling into the patterns of the welfare system. The redemptive power of the Gospel transforms people in such a way that it enables them to overcome the dire consequences of poverty. Sociological studies of Christianity in the 1960s and 1970s were usually hostile to churches. The scenario has changed today. As social planners and city governments acknowledge the problems generated by the current economic system, sociologists have come to see churches as the source of hope from which the urban poor gain strength, courage, and a language to cope with poverty.³

CLUES FOR THE FUTURE

This reflection on ministry only makes sense within the larger picture of the life of the churches in the United States and the reality of global Christianity. Many points in the narratives of The Lexington Seminar show that concerns that in the past were characteristic of the church in “missionary territories” have become concerns of the church at home. The situation in the United States is not as critical as that in Europe where Christianity is in open decline, but in order to have a future churches clearly must adopt a missional stance. If we accept the fact that the West, namely Europe and North America, is to be considered as a mission field, we also must accept the validity of a search for a ministry approach that will have a missionary thrust and will take seriously the cultural context of that mission field. Let me present here what I call three clues to be pursued in the future.

First, missiologists have been studying with renewed vigor the discipleship process as it took place before the Constantinian experience. They are looking for clues that will help churches prepare Christians to live as a minority in a hostile world. I have found especially helpful the work of Alan Kreider, who has reviewed many recorded stories of conversions in the first three centuries. As he studies the records of early Christian converts, Kreider (1999, xv) writes, “I am struck by the way in which conversion involved change not just of *belief* but also of *belonging* and *behavior*. . . . Often scholars have not given due weight to these dimensions, so that when they tell the stories—some of them very famous—of early Christian converts they overlook the concern for ethics and solidarity, that, to me, is evident in the texts.”⁴

Missionary experience and observation confirms what the more systematic work of scholars uncovers, and it is pointing in the direction of a renewed concept of discipleship and education for the faith. Because of our Protestant “modern” bias, we emphasize doctrine and the correct understanding of it as

154 •WHAT IS THE MINISTRY TOWARD WHICH WE TEACH?•

well as the rationalization of the institutional life of the church and even of the public witness of Christians. We are learning now that the redemptive power of the gospel and the power of the Holy Spirit that are active when truth is applied to life can change deep-seated patterns of behavior. Perhaps established churches have lost their connection with that dimension of Christianity. We are also learning that the sense of belonging is a key component of the Christian experience. We are learning it from the joy and meaningful experience of marginal people coming to Christ from the bottom of society, those who have not belonged to any form of community, who have experienced the reality of lostness in a dramatic way, and who have experienced the joy of coming home when they meet Christ.

Second, clues point to the possibility that we are living in the middle of a New Reformation. Sociologist Donald E. Miller, University of California, has written a puzzling description and analysis of three mega-churches that could well be described as postmodern churches because of their ability to understand their context and respond to it with a contextual kind of ministry. Miller's book (1997) is based on careful field work from a team and his own convincing interpretation. The title of the book is eloquent—*Reinventing American Protestantism: Christianity in the New Millennium*—and it offers postmodernity in American culture as a means of understanding the significance of what he calls “the new paradigm churches” that have developed in recent decades. The thesis of his book is that

A revolution is transforming American Protestantism. While many of the mainline churches are losing membership, overall church attendance is not declining. Instead, a new style of Christianity is being born in the United States, one that responds to fundamental cultural changes that began in the mid-1960s. These New Paradigm Churches as I call them in this book are changing the way Christianity looks and is experienced. (1)

He observes that ministry in these churches has left behind denominational patterns received from the past and is appropriating contemporary cultural forms, such as a new genre of worship music and new structures for the institutional church, and is thus “democratizing access to the sacred by radicalizing the Protestant principle of priesthood of all believers.” For Miller we are witnessing the coming of a new era of postdenominational Christianity in the United States.

Third, a group of theological educators and missiologists have taken up the challenge posed by Lesslie Newbigin (1986) and are exploring what it means for Western churches to adopt a missionary stance in their own culture. Some of them are linked in the “Gospel and Culture Networks” and have been working consistently in a critical analysis of the legacy of Christendom in the life of congregations and denominations. Their books take seriously the present

forms of ministerial and congregational life and practice, and they outline new models as they record and evaluate emerging forms of ministry, congregational organization, and evangelistic activity. Because of their serious work in the development of a biblical and theological frame for a new missional stance, they deserve the attention of anyone interested in ministerial formation.⁵

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

If the ministry toward which we teach is taking on new dimensions as a response to a new era in the history of the church, the theological institutions in which formation for ministry takes place must become laboratories for this new type of ministry. I cannot develop in depth the implications of the reflection I have offered, so I limit myself only to pointing in some directions that are being explored and outlined by the institutions that have participated in The Lexington Seminar.

As the student body in seminaries continues to reflect the demography of the global village, theological education has the opportunity to become a laboratory for a new type of ministry. However, the mere presence of diversity is not enough. An intentional dialogue must be fostered through a participatory pedagogical approach, remembering always that true dialogue requires openness in all participants and that its aim is not necessarily that minorities conform to the thought patterns of the predominant culture but that all participants be mutually enriched. A clear sense of *koinonia* is at the heart of participatory pedagogy.

The ministry of the Word will continue to be at the heart of Christian ministry, and the formation of ministers will still require that they be provided with tools, based on the best available scholarship, that are good instruments for the task of interpreting the text. The need for new communication methods appropriate for people who experience postmodernity does not dispense seminaries from the task of teaching the disciplines that are necessary for understanding the text of Scripture. However, as the narrative of Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary (2001) reminds us, there is a difference between approaching “texts as texts” from the studious objectivity of a narrow academic perspective and approaching texts as *kerygma* in a theological community. A contribution of postmodern culture is that it has helped remind us of the difference.

Paying due attention to national or international students who come from a more religious and less analytical culture may also be a source of insights into spiritual realities. When free to express themselves in an atmosphere of participatory dialogue for learning, my students from so-called fundamentalist back-

grounds have sometimes brought our classes into a deeper and clearer understanding of New Testament material than critical analytical tools have allowed others to appropriate.

As a growing number of ordained ministers and other experienced church leaders enroll in degree programs, theological education becomes a training ground for “reflection on praxis.” The pedagogical process must be conducive to the critical learning that comes when the practice and experience of students is placed under the light provided by an adequate grasp of Scripture, history, the social sciences, and other topics. The process requires a careful description of practice from what we could call a hermeneutics of *sympathy* rather than one of *suspicion*. Students must be evaluated not only by their command of the information provided by the classic disciplines but by their ability to reflect on their own practice.

Finally, “agenda-setting courses” should grow in importance, for they allow students to pose questions that arise in concrete situations of ministry and use all areas of the theological curriculum to answer those questions (Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary 2000). These courses require a dialogue of the disciplines among faculty in such a way that the point of connection between theological scholarship and the practice of ministry is constantly visible. By providing courses that address concrete ministerial issues and encourage the application of knowledge from many disciplines, seminaries can reduce the perception among students that certain disciplines are merely academic hoops through which students must jump in order to get a degree. Further, evaluation of students under these conditions should measure their ability to apply academic and scholarly knowledge to pastoral practice.

CONCLUSION

Theologians dealing with ministerial and pastoral issues today are being driven to restudy New Testament teaching about religiosity as well as about the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. For the life of the church, communication technology and techniques as well as an intellectually reasonable faith are not enough. Spiritual power and disciplines such as prayer, Bible meditation, and fasting are necessary for mission across new religious frontiers. Theological educators should be open to the ministry of persons who are gifted to minister in these areas and may also aspire to develop such gifts in themselves. On the other hand, the Apostle Paul, writing to the Corinthians, recognized that immorality, abuses, and manipulation could exist even within the context of spectacular spiritual gifts.

Working in theological education and training for mission in North America, we have become aware of the importance of spiritual formation for

ministers. A change of mind has been taking place at this point. If ministry is conceived simply as the exercise of a set of professional abilities, education for ministry could follow what missiologist Jim Pludemann (2000, 902) describes as an “assembly line paradigm” in which spiritual formation is neglected because it does not fit the paradigm. “The factory paradigm encourages missionaries to set objectives for mere outward behavior. It is primarily interested in quantities.” Spiritual formation on the other hand is a process that takes place inside a person; it is not something that can be measured, controlled, or predicted. Theological education must become itself a form of ministry, a way of making available the means of grace that God has provided for the continuous growth of God’s people toward the goal of becoming Christ-like persons.

NOTES

1. For two valuable discussions of the subject from very different but coincidental perspectives, see Groome (1991, 299–366) and Engen (1991, 87–130).
2. My analysis of context in this section follows the pattern I develop in “The Global Scenario at the Turn of the Century” (Escobar 2000, 25–46).
3. For a story of how a sociologist in the city of Philadelphia has changed his mind and come to realize the key role of churches, see Stafford (1999, 35–39).
4. Emphasis mine; see also Kreider (1995).
5. Valuable work of the North American network may be seen in Guder (1998) and Hunsberger and Van Gelder (1996).