



# CONVERSATIONS

## Reflections on Faith and Learning

The 2006 Summer Seminar met June 15-20 in Northeast Harbor, Maine, at the Asticou Inn. This Seminar was the eighth meeting of The Lexington Seminar: Theological Teaching for the Church's Ministries, but the first cohort of university related divinity schools. Teams of faculty and administrators from Candler School of Theology at Emory University, Harvard Divinity School, University of Notre Dame Department of Theology, and Vanderbilt University Divinity School met to discuss the narratives in teaching and learning that they had prepared and the issues in theological education that are unique to university related schools. The following texts are excerpted from reflections given by Seminar participants during morning worship.

### Teachers' Faith

Hebrews 11:1-7

By *Raymond B. Williams*

Founding Director,  
The Wabash Center  
La Follette Distinguished Professor  
Emeritus in the Humanities,  
Professor Emeritus of Religion,  
Wabash College

The thought structure of Hebrews is intriguingly complex. Time and space are extended in rich metaphors and typologies to call readers to faith and a lively hope. The



*Raymond B. Williams*

See "Faith" on page 2

### The Parable of the Sower

Mark 4:1-20

By *Gail O'Day*

Associate Dean of  
Academic Affairs  
Almar H. Shatford  
Professor of Preaching  
and New Testament,  
Candler School  
of Theology at Emory  
University



*Gail R. O'Day*

Listen! A sower went out to sow." So begins what we conventionally refer to as "the parable of the sower," an agricultural parable that is built around a basic and common agricultural

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### In Our Own Hand

Ezekiel 31:1-12; Galatians 6:11-18

By *Stephanie A. Paulsell*

Houghton Professor of the Practice of  
Ministry Studies  
Harvard Divinity  
School



*Stephanie A. Paulsell*

Those of us who found ourselves inside writer Ashley Bryan's house on Cranberry Island will never forget it. It was like being inside someone's imagination — full of color, movement, and life. Every inch of Mr. Bryan's home revealed his deepest commitments, his fiercest hopes. It was

See "Hand" on page 3

### The Jeremiah-Revelation Continuum

Jeremiah 21:11-14; Revelation 21:22-22:5

By *James Hudnut-Beumler*

Dean of the Divinity School  
Anne Potter Wilson Distinguished  
Professor of American Religious  
History  
Vanderbilt  
University  
Divinity School



*James Hudnut-Beumler*

I believe that Mac exercised a perverse sense of humor when he assigned me to preach on Revelation.

When you ask a southerner to

See "Continuum" on page 5

### The Great Tree

Ezekiel 17:22-24; Psalm 92:1-4,12-15

By *Virgilio Elizondo*

Distinguished  
Visiting Professor  
of Theology,  
University of  
Notre Dame  
Department of  
Theology



*Virgilio Elizondo*

Thus says the Lord God: I myself will take a sprig from the lofty top of the cedar and will set it out; I will plant it

See "Tree" on page 5 photo

## “Teacher’s Faith” (continued from page 1)

first verses of Hebrews move horizontally through time to the present toward a future: “Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things.” Then vertically toward the transcendent: “He is the reflection of God’s glory and the imprint of God’s very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word.”

Our reading from the faith chapter has the same structure: “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.” “Things hoped for” focuses our attention on the vista of God’s future and places us in the line of our ancestors “who died in faith, not having received what was promised, but having seen it and greeted it from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth.”

All teachers, and especially theologi-

*Folk trio Old Grey Goose shares traditional Maine music with Seminar participants.*



cal teachers, are pushing the limits of a mundane ‘now,’ outward toward the promise in our students of a better future and upward toward a richer, more complete experience and understanding of life. We do this for our students first, and also for the people, religious institutions, and societies they will serve. Perhaps, God willing, even for ourselves. “Things hoped for; things not seen,” a promised land and a new heaven and earth. I bet each of you has in mind a faithful teacher who raised your aspirations, supported your reach toward your best self, caused you to dream dreams and see visions, and inspired you to become a teacher. Those teachers are a “great cloud of witnesses.”

It is easy to lose faith as a teacher

when we get bogged down in mundane tasks, statistical outcomes, and guild affairs, rather than focusing on the promise inherent in our students’ lives and learning. One of my teachers, Fred Craddock, said that, when he was a lad, sitting on church pews listening to stories of martyrs, missionaries, and heroes of the faith, he yearned to be able to perform one heroic act of faith. But when he became a teacher, he found that the call of God most often came while walking down the hall at the end of a long day. A student would touch his elbow to ask, “Professor, you got a minute?” His regular morning prayer was, “O God, I thank you for work that is more important than how I feel about it at any given moment.” It is easy to lose faith as a teacher, because we are unable to gift our students with what we do not possess ourselves.

I love backpacking in the Smokey Mountains. When hiking with a heavy pack, my tendency is to focus my eyes on the path beneath our feet. Occasionally someone exclaims, “Look up!” and mountain laurel in full-bloom covers a hillside. Or “Look out there!” and vistas of mountain peaks stretch out toward eternity. As teachers we carry heavy loads made heavier when we focus only on the dirt beneath our feet. The transforming call of faith is outward and upward — the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things unseen. That straightens our backs, strengthens our step, compels us to teach and empowers our lives.



*Seminar participants prepare to enjoy a Maine meal and a concert on Little Cranberry Island.*

## “Sower”

(continued from page 1)

practice — the broadcast method of sowing seed, in which the sower broadly and widely scatters seed across the terrain. This method of sowing seed contrasts with another agricultural practice, in which seeds are planted carefully in rows. The focus of each and every sentence of the parable proper is on the sower and the seed. Yet most of the time, interpreters focus on the soil, instead of on the sower and the seed, as if this parable were really about the quality of soil instead of the practice of sowing.

*“...it is a plant that I had long assumed was dead that somehow chooses this moment to come to life.”*

Such an interpretive bent happened very early in the use and interpretation of this parable. The Gospel of Thomas is content simply to recount the parable proper, but Mark, Matthew and Luke all append interpretations that put the emphasis on why particular seeds and soils were not a good match. In this interpretation, a whole new set of narratives are constructed around the seed and their fate. Instead of one narrative that focuses on the sower, we now have four mini-narratives about the seeds and the soil. And these mini-narratives move outside the realm of agriculture in their explanations for why the seeds failed to yield fruit — Satan comes, no root perseverance, choking wealth.

The lure of such explanations is irresistible. They provide me — probably as they provided early church preachers, teachers, and missionaries — with ways to explain why things aren’t going well, why not everyone converted to the joy of the gospel, why not everyone is an A student. But when I read these

explanations carefully, the ones proffered in the Gospel of Mark itself or ones that follow suit, I notice something interesting and a bit unsettling. The explanations attempt to tell why the seed doesn’t grow, but none of them can really explain why the seed does grow.

Sowing is the most frustrating of vocations, as any teacher knows. In the instant the seed leaves your hand, scattered to the winds, one loses control of what comes next. I may look around my classroom and think I recognize and understand the fate of the seed, that I know who will bear fruit. But while I am right sometimes in my assessments, I am usually wrong. What looked like rocky soil to me turns out to be good soil, but only after the semester is over and oftentimes after that particular piece of soil has graduated. The seed has a life of its own; anyone who gardens knows that. One year something will appear in my garden that I did not plant this season, and then I realize it is a plant that I had long assumed was dead that somehow chooses this moment to come to life.

Yet such surprises are ultimately what shape the vocation of the sower. I can start something, but I can never, ever finish it. Seeds are scattered, seeds grow, and it remains a mystery to me how and why. This mystery of growth and fruitfulness is simultaneously frustrating and liberating. The sower is called to scatter seed, not plant in careful rows, and in so doing, the sower gives oneself over to possibilities outside human control and reckoning. Some seed will not grow, or will not grow in ways that I recognize as growth. And some seed will grow, but in the sowing, I cannot tell the difference. We are left only with the metaphor of sowing, of offering seeds of life broadly and freely, with no promise of returns. Such is the mystery of the kingdom of God.



*David and Courtney Lamberth relax after the morning sessions.*

## “Hand”

(continued from page 1)

a little overwhelming at first — there were thousands of objects set on every available surface, hanging on the walls, suspended from the ceiling. But gradually, with Mr. Bryan’s help, it became possible to see each object in relation to all the others. It was a testimony to everything he has breathed in his lifetime and breathed out again, a new creation, transformed by having passed through his body, his convictions, his questions.

Reading and discussing each other’s narratives this week has felt a little like being inside one another’s imaginations. We’ve moved through the rooms, studying what love and hope look like next to knowledge and skill, or ministry studies next to religious studies, or the adolescent exuberance of a university on the move next to the mature theological thinking of its divinity school, or the desires of our students for spiritual formation next to our own uncertain notions of what spiritual formation is. All our narratives, all our attempts to create curricula and learning goals

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## “Hand” (continued from page 3)

reflect a desire, I think, to set the resources we bring to the education of ministers in new relation to each other, and to leave room for unexpected resources that we have not even yet imagined. But how do we do this? What is our methodology?

Gail O'Day gave me her theory about Mr. Bryan's methodology. He must have placed one thing next to another as he created or acquired them, she said, creating a conversation among them that evolves every time he adds a new piece. I think this is our best hope for a methodology as well. The answers to the questions we considered this week won't be the achievement of a single committee and they won't be captured in our grant applications to the Lexington Seminar. We live into our answers through our shared work, one classroom, one student, one pedagogical choice at a time.

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*“...any field of inquiry our universities offer might potentially be brought to bear on preparation for ministry...”*

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The apostle Paul offers an image for the work ahead of us in the reading from the letter to the Galatians. “Look at what big letters I make when I write with my own hand!” Paul exclaims like a child with a new crayon. As Raymond Williams reminded us on Friday morning, that we are teachers is a testimony to our own teachers, those who passed on to us the best of what they had to offer and invited us to write it in our own hand. Isn't this what we want for our students, that they join this conversation about



*Artist Ashley Bryan's house reflects years of creative work on every available space, creation that evolves and builds on itself, much like a methodology for academic endeavors.*

ministry, making contributions in their own hand?

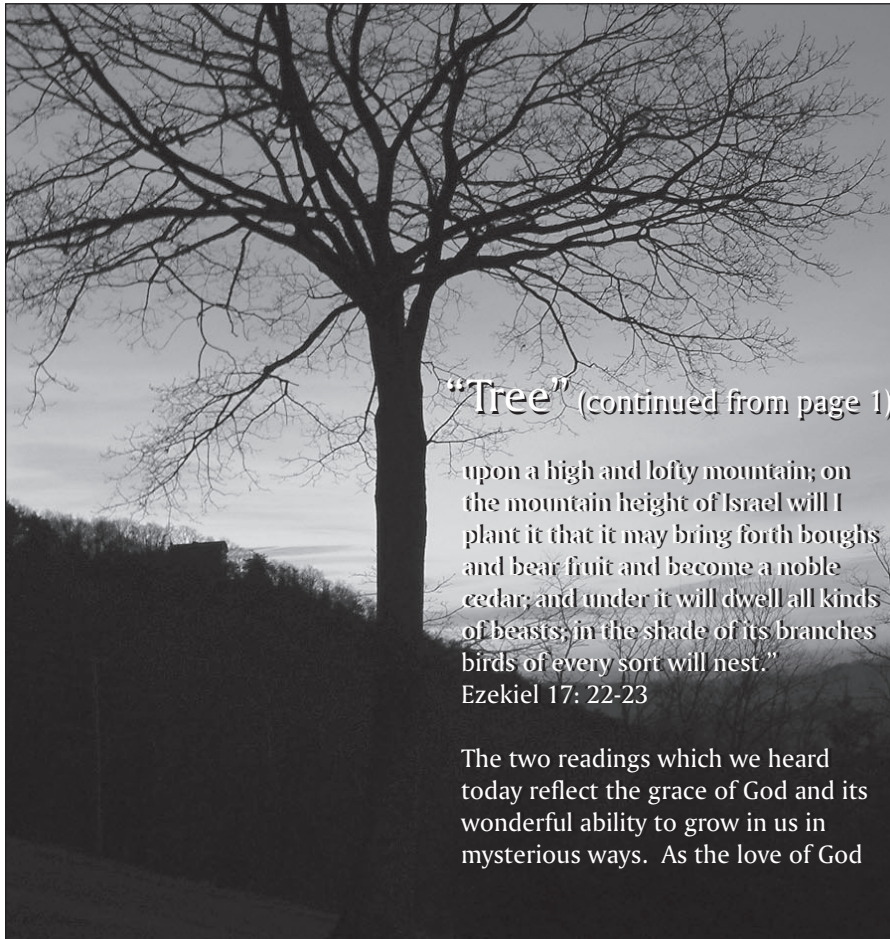
In my first job in ministry, I worked in a university chapel led by an Episcopalian priest who had adapted the Sunday liturgy from the Book of Common Prayer. After I had assisted him for a few Sundays, he asked me to take responsibility for celebrating the eucharist once a month. I'm not sure I can lead this celebration, I told him, because I'm really not sure what it means. In my tradition, we have the Lord's Supper, a meal around a table, not a sacrifice at an altar. And he said to me, Stephanie, we don't do this because we know what it means. We do it in order to find out what it means.

I'm glad I took those words to heart, because I've needed them in theological education. Especially in contexts like ours, where any field of inquiry our universities offer might potentially be brought to bear on preparation for ministry, we need to be able to take some risks, to find out what it means

to set one thing down next to another. What does it mean when we ask our future ministers, from whom we rightly expect thoughtful theological judgments, to pause when they encounter something unfamiliar and to postpone judgment for a time? To place knowledge produced in a congregation, prison, or refugee camp alongside knowledge produced in a classroom? To integrate the deepening of love and hope with the acquisition of knowledge and skills? To study for ministry alongside students from different faiths? What does it mean to ask our students to receive what we have to offer, but to write it in their own hand?

These questions produce anxiety, and for good reason: we can't know in advance what the answers will be. And in that way, perhaps, theological education is most like ministry itself: improvisational, and deeply human.





## “Tree” (continued from page 1)

upon a high and lofty mountain; on the mountain height of Israel will I plant it that it may bring forth boughs and bear fruit and become a noble cedar; and under it will dwell all kinds of beasts; in the shade of its branches birds of every sort will nest.”  
Ezekiel 17: 22-23

The two readings which we heard today reflect the grace of God and its wonderful ability to grow in us in mysterious ways. As the love of God

grows within us, it becomes external, it cannot be private, and as such it has exterior effects. The grace of God grows into the image of the great tree which grows from the mustard seed. The big tree offers shade for the birds and creates a new space of welcome.

This message is particularly relevant today in the context of immigration issues. The tree represents God’s kingdom on earth, a place for all to come and rest. Birds come from everywhere to rest in the tree — there are no undocumented birds! And the shade offers us protective presence and the dream that some day we will all be able to rest in the kingdom of God and in His refreshing protective presence. The more we experience the love of God, the more we are drawn to create such new spaces.



## “Continuum” (continued from page 1)

preach on the last book of the Bible, and provide a tent to preach in, there is no telling what might happen. Actually, Presbyterians in the Bible belt tend to avoid Revelation. We don’t want to deal with this book, this genre of literature, it makes us nervous. And that’s a problem that I think all of us from university-based schools share and one I wish us to reflect upon as we move towards returning home.

Why don’t we often embrace texts like Revelation 21 and 22? I think that we have trouble with this hopeful, visionary side of what I would call the Jeremiah-Revelation continuum, because we are more comfortable, and far too comfortable, with the critical Jeremiah side of things. “God

doesn’t like the way you are living.” “You are not doing justice; God’s going to get you for that.” That’s how Jeremiah does critical theology. It’s how we usually do theology and ethics, maybe especially at Vanderbilt where we see all too readily all the ways our world does not measure up to the glory of God. I will wager it is the way you and your colleagues do critical theology as well. It is absolutely necessary to deconstruct false ways of living and to confront injustice. But this Revelation text points us in another direction that I hear we have trouble with. It offers us a vision of how things might be: a poetic construal of abundance and joy in terms we can well understand.

If persecuted people like those early Christians can envision and express hope like this, what is stopping us? The fear that we will not be seen as serious academics? I think that, in what I heard this week, vision turns

out to be the indispensable virtue of the best theological teachers. Without vision, the people perish and so do their teachers. So a challenge of this text to me and to you is this: are we willing to envision our hope in extravagant terms, too?

I think our Revelation 21-22 version of hope might look something like this:

I saw no theological schools in the city, because their work has succeeded. Justice prevails and there is enough for all to eat. I saw that people had taught love and hope for the church so much that, like the temple, the church was no more and God alone was their temple. And I saw that spiritual formation had ended, for everyone was at home in their own spirit, and recognized the image of the Lamb in one another. All

See “Continuum” on page 6

# 2006 Divinity School Teams



*University of Notre Dame Department of Theology: (L to R) Matthew Zyniewicz, Michael Connors, C.S.C., Virgilio Elizondo, John Cavadini, and Randall Zachman.*



*Harvard Divinity School: (L to R, seated) Donald K. Swearer, Anne E. Monius, Mark U. Edwards. (L to R, standing) Stephanie Paulsell, Francis X. Clooney, and David C. Lamberth.*



*Candler School of Theology at Emory University: (L to R) Thomas E. Frank, Teresa L. Fry Brown, Michael Joseph Brown, Gail R. O'Day, and Theodore Brelsford, Jr.*



*Vanderbilt University Divinity School: (L to R) James Hudnut-Beumler, Trudy Stringer, Alice Hunt, Herbert Marbury, and Viki Matson.*

## “Continuum”

*(continued from page 5)*

disciplines had disappeared, because everyone could converse together equally, for there was no hoarding of knowledge, only generous sharing of wisdom for the healing of the nations. On either side of the river of life, all religious diversity was present as before, but it was no more remarkable than 12 kinds of fruit in bloom at one time, on one tree. Then the angel

showed me that no one made or defended normative claims, because all simply experienced for themselves what is true, what is beautiful, and what is good.

None of these visions seems achievable with simply a grant from the Lexington Seminar. And yet, we are moving in their direction, in the direction of holy and extravagant

hope. Without big hopes it is hard to teach well. Each of these visions, and others like them, provide the telos of our labors as teachers. As we leave this island, may we nurture the hopes we've expressed for our schools, for the ministry, and for our lives. And may God bless us as we go and as we serve. Amen.



# Final Project Consultation 2004 Seminaries

Five seminaries participated in the Final Project Consultation of the Lexington Seminar April 20-22 at The Shaker Village of Pleasant Hill, Kentucky: Ashland Theological Seminary in Ohio; Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond in Virginia; Lancaster Theological Seminary in Pennsylvania; Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary in Columbia, South Carolina; and Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, D.C.

During the Consultation, teams from each school described their issues, contexts, and projects over the past two years; outlined the resources used in developing and implementing the projects; and shared the ways in which the projects have impacted their faculties and institutions.

The peaceful setting of Pleasant Hill caused many participants to express renewed appreciation for the importance of time and setting for conversation about theological education, an insight they had learned in Northeast Harbor during the Summer Seminar. Several faculty members spoke of how this concept has transformed the way their faculties meet and work together.

In addition to giving their final reports, participants at the Consultation enjoyed time to walk in the historic Shaker Village, listen to a program on Shaker music and life, and participate in a performance of shape note singing hosted by the Appalachian Association of Shape Note Singers.

During the last hour of our time together, participants listed some of the important themes, insights, and



*Michael Harton and David Baker converse between sessions at The Shaker Village of Pleasant Hill.*

questions they had gleaned from the weekend's conversations:

- Seminaries feel a pressure to diversify, and they acknowledge the difficult reality of keeping it all together.
  - At times schools are able to claim a distinct identity, saying, "This is who we are."
  - There is a real tension of boundaries between the former two statements.
  - We need to be self-critical and self-reflective before we change.
  - It is important to make the decision to be influencers, rather than just reactors.
  - The nature of the faculty is crucial for the ongoing life of the seminary.
  - Institutional life keeps growing more complex, with multiple levels, layers, and tasks.
  - We remain impressed with the depth of theological faithfulness among theological educators in their vocation of training clergy.
  - We must continue to develop new models of theological education that
- are more "porous" in terms of serving students from a wide range of backgrounds.
  - There are still underserved populations of students. It is growing especially more difficult to bring in and serve our foreign students.
  - It is hard to be creative in the midst of so much transition, including presidential searches.
  - What is it that unites us as institutions?
  - To what end are we working?
  - We are feeling an increasing sense of "congregational centeredness."
  - How do we continue to place an importance on theological education as vocation?
  - We are moving away from being defensive and competitive with other institutions and moving towards articulating what the church will be.
  - If we made formational activities optional for students, few would come. If we want faculty to become a teaching collegium rather than a collection of experts, then we have to build in formational times for them as well.

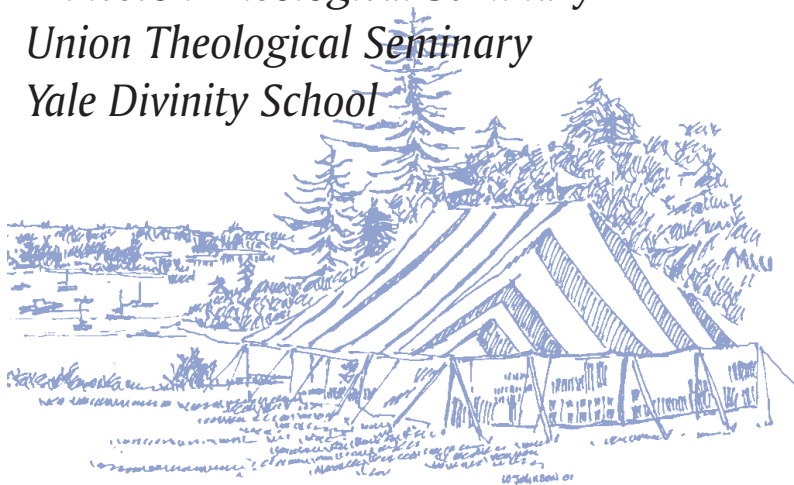


# THE LEXINGTON SEMINAR

*A Project Supported  
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Lilly Endowment Inc.  
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## Summer Seminar Participants

*Duke Divinity School  
Emmanuel College, University of Toronto  
Princeton Theological Seminary  
Union Theological Seminary  
Yale Divinity School*



### CONVERSATIONS

Newsletter of The Lexington Seminar

Fall 2006

Vol. 8, No. 2

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Published by "The Lexington Seminar:  
Theological Teaching for the Church's Min-  
istries." A Project Supported by Lilly Endow-  
ment Inc. and Sponsored by Lexington  
Theological Seminary.

631 South Limestone Street  
Lexington, KY 40508  
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