

THE LEXINGTON SEMINAR
THEOLOGICAL TEACHING FOR THE CHURCH'S MINISTRIES

FINAL REPORT OF
GORDON-CONWELL THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY
SOUTH HAMILTON, MASSACHUSETTS

SUBMITTED TO
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ISSUE AND CONTEXT

With the generous programmatic and financial support of the Lilly Endowment-funded Lexington Seminar, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary set out to understand the connection between what students are taught in class and how they act outside of the classroom. The project, on all levels, involved narratives. First was the case study which prompted consideration of the topic—the story of how some students chose to interpret campus rules. Then, as the faculty members considered how they could impact the spiritual and moral development of students in the classroom, they began to tell their personal stories. Their own spiritual development was placed in the context of this educational and spiritual community. But each of these faculty members would not be in this place if it weren't for the collective story they share in the history of the seminary and the narrative of our tradition as a school and as an evangelical movement. This historical level becomes the starting point for this paper, as it provides a context by offering a window into the missional uniqueness and theological moorings of Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary.

Specifically, the Lexington Seminar provided the space and resources for Gordon-Conwell faculty members to reflect thoughtfully on their individual and shared stories. In so doing, faculty members pondered new methods of integrating an intentional spiritual-formation conscience into their teaching. To demonstrate how progress was made toward our Lexington Seminar objective, a context needs to be given to the various levels of narrative at work, beginning with our shared history.

Our history begins in a Boston building that neighbors today know as a South End complex of high-priced condominiums, which once housed the worshippers of the Clarendon Street Baptist Church. This church was the place where in 1889 a handful of students—men *and* women—took the first course offered at the Boston Missionary Training School, taught by Adoniram Judson Gordon, the noted Baptist pastor. A.J. Gordon was one of the 19th century giants who wanted to see the world evangelized in his generation.

Not long before he began the Boston Missionary Training School, A.J. Gordon was a featured evangelist at Dwight L. Moody's Northfield, Mass. Conference where 100 college men made a commitment to give their lives to spread the Gospel throughout the world. It wasn't long before these 100 men were known as the "Mount Hermon 100," and thus began the Student Volunteer Movement numbering 5,000 strong, committed to "the evangelization of the world in this generation." In the meantime, that Clarendon Street Baptist Church had become an informal school to train workers for world evangelization. At its core was a bedrock commitment to the primacy of God's Word, the unique work of the cross, and the urgency of the Great Commission.

Also in the 1880s, 310 miles down the Atlantic coast, another Christian leader was making a mark in history. Russell Conwell was one of those beloved "movers and shakers" of the late 1800s. With the money he made from his "Acres of Diamonds" speech, he founded Temple University—named so because it held its first classes at Temple Baptist Church. There in Philadelphia emerged a seminary committed to being a

center for urban ministerial education, preparing inner-city pastors. In 1960, the seminary in Philadelphia was renamed Conwell School of Theology, with a reaffirmation of its mission “to establish a progressive orthodox theology, vigorously Biblical and yet in close touch with modern culture.”

As these schools grew over the decades of the early- and mid-20th century, so did their reputation for academic excellence and scholarly faculty. Yet as scholarship advanced, the leadership of the school did not leave behind the vision of A.J. Gordon that the Good News of Christ, the *evangel*, must be brought to all the world. Both of these Atlantic seaboard seminaries were known for their strong roots in ministry and evangelism, steeped in the trustworthy Word of God and the unique centrality of Christ’s atoning work. Over the years these schools’ faculties, boards of trustees and presidents stayed loyal to those earliest core principles, both in Boston and in Philadelphia. When the battle for the Bible’s inerrancy was at stake in the 1960s, it was Gordon Divinity School where scholars assembled from across the country in 1967 to reaffirm the doctrine of Scripture and the absolute trustworthiness of God’s Word.

So it was in 1969 that a pastor named Harold John Ockenga, a philanthropist named J. Howard Pew and an evangelist named Billy Graham began to envision a school within a strong evangelical framework on the east coast, which would be independent and multi-denominational. The united school would be Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, and would be located on a former Carmelite Monastery in South Hamilton, Massachusetts. At his inauguration as president at Symphony Hall in Boston on Oct. 22, 1969, Ockenga said, “The time has come for us to re-emphasize the Christian virtues of purity, honesty, industry, charity, and courtesy. We must allow Christian convictions to penetrate every aspect of our existence... And in so doing, we must hold fast to an unchanging biblical standard of truth and virtue.”

Within a few years, the seminary had established an urban ministerial education center in the city of Boston, building off the Conwell legacy of a campus for the Christian leaders in the neighborhoods of the city, and a Southeast United States campus in Charlotte, North Carolina. Though times have changed, the pillars of these two 19th century schools have remained relatively steadfast and are inherent to our mission statement. Today, Gordon-Conwell is a growing multi-denominational school in the evangelical tradition numbering over 2,000 degree students with a deep-seated commitment to the high doctrine of Scripture, the centrality of Christ’s redeeming work and the mandate to take the Good News and proclaim it with relevance and personal witness.

PROJECT DESIGN

This historical narrative and the evangelical context out of which this school was borne became a primary focus of our Lexington Seminar project. The leadership of the project,

comprised of faculty and academic administration¹, made some key decisions early in the planning that faculty needed to be given the freedom and space to think and reflect upon their shared story in the establishment of this seminary and the spiritual traditions that have influenced its development. Not only was it important that faculty share their common story, but likewise sharing their personal stories was crucial to meeting the goal of the project. The objective of the project was to begin to dialogue as faculty at a new level on matters of personal and shared spiritual stories so that they might consider anew the role of spiritual formation in their vocational ministries of teaching.

When the faculty team from Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary departed from Northeast Harbor, Maine, on June 11, 2002, it did so with a profound sense of appreciation for the unmatched opportunity it had been given to retreat and reflect.² At that time, each of the team members was fully committed to engaging the faculty—many of whom are new as a result of enrollment growth—into a thoughtful discussion on their contribution toward the spiritual formation of Gordon-Conwell students. This would have to take place at two levels. First, faculty would need to begin talking among themselves through intentional moments about *their* spiritual journeys. Second, as these conversations emerged over the grant period of the project, the faculty would also think through how spiritual formation happens—conceptually and practically—in the context of the courses they teach. Over the summer months of 2002, the ideas germinated within each of us that the issues inherent to the case study needed to be addressed first by time for the faculty’s thoughtful reflection on who we are together and individually as people of God. From these questions, we began to imagine how we might go about undertaking an audit of our faculty as to what they are able to “bring to the table” in the area of spiritual formation within this community.

The first formal follow-up step to the Lexington Seminar of June 2002 was for the faculty to begin talking about the idea of Christian community, which is inseparable from any sustained conversations on spiritual formation. We moved into this conversation by making “Gordon-Conwell as a Community in Christ” the theme of our faculty retreat on August 20, 2002. The format was relaxed and casual as many were coming off the summer holidays and ramping up for the courses to be taught in the fall. Forming the basis of our conversation that day was a series of faculty-led discussions on the concept of community as understood through Scripture and the life of the Christian, especially as it relates to our seminary. This was a fruitful time for all of us to think creatively on a dimension of our school that is truly essential in theological education. Further, having

¹ Participants in the Lexington Seminar task force included Walter C. Kaiser (president), Barry H. Corey (academic dean and vice president for education), Kenneth Swetland (professor of ministry and former academic dean), Raymond Pendleton (professor of counseling), John J. Davis (professor of systematic theology and Christian ethics), Timothy Tennent (associate professor of world missions), Carol Kaminski (assistant professor of Old Testament), Paul C.H. Lim (assistant professor of historical theology) and as a consultant, Garth Rosell (professor of church history).

² This final report would be hollow if it did not express profound gratitude to the leadership of the Lexington Seminar and Lilly Endowment, as well as the new friends made from Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia, General Theological Seminary, Lexington Theological Seminary and Colgate Rochester Crozer Divinity School. It was an energizing and renewing experience for all of us.

this as a faculty-led event was an intentional first step toward the forthcoming project described herein on the idea of Christian community and spiritual formation.

Given this background, we anticipated two goals to be realized through our Lexington Seminar conversations and the subsequent planning process. First, it was important that as a school with a growing faculty—now numbering 45 full-time men and women across three geographically-distant campuses—we *work more intentionally on cultivating a sense of community and camaraderie among faculty members*. This can be neither forced on the one hand nor allowed to “just happen” on the other. Our younger faculty members are looking for more opportunities to be together, and they value the interactions with older faculty. We also need to create imaginative moments for our faculty to be together which will provide a fitting milieu to discuss their role in the spiritual formation of students through the medium of the story, shared and unique. The second goal, therefore, was to *arrange a series of discussions around the faculty’s reasonable role in students’ spiritual maturity and ways in which this process might best be assessed*.

These guiding questions led to refining and restructuring the way in which we would design a program with faculty to better address vital issues of spiritual formation among students. This is significant given how—as our case study reflected in Maine—many students have a strong sense of entitlement coupled with a disconnect between knowing, being and doing.

RESOURCES USED IN DEVELOPING AND IMPLEMENTING THE PROJECT

The intent of the Lexington Seminar grant all along has been for its programs to be faculty-led, and as a result no external consultants and limited external resources were used to accomplish what we set out to do. The primary resource was a bound document that was published internally and used as the literary guide to the August 2003 Faculty Spiritual Heritage Trip. This approximately 400-page guidebook, compiled and edited by church historian Garth Rosell, consisted of suggested readings, a schedule of events, descriptions of the historical sites and their context and a bibliography.

PROJECT RESULTS

We discussed the foundational issues of Christian community in our August 2002 faculty retreat shortly after the five days at Northeast Harbor with the Lexington Seminar. This built an expectation that “conversations in community” would be a recurring theme with the faculty during the year. This continued in a much more intentional and intensive way at our August 2003 faculty retreat on more particular issues of spiritual formation among faculty, in community and for students. As we addressed the fundamental importance of nurturing among ourselves a Christ-centered community in August 2002, we built upon this a year later, grappling with how a diverse faculty committed to Christian community understands, embraces and nurtures a culture of spiritual nourishment that permeates us and impacts our classrooms.

To arrive at these conversations, we needed to take some carefully-choreographed steps, all undertaken and implemented with the assistance of the Lexington Seminar grant. Each of these steps was planned with the outcome of achieving the two goals of: 1) opportunities for intentional space with faculty to have conversation about their spiritual stories, both shared and individual, and 2) conceptual and pragmatic ideas for faculty to consider about how to refine the ways in which they teach so that students would indeed find the classroom to be a place of profound spiritual development. Though varied in design, influence and time, these projects each had as its objective movement of the faculty toward these two goals.

Hence, the following activities—including the retreats—were designed with significant input by the Lexington Seminar Task Force and were undertaken to provide a consistency in addressing the ongoing formation of community within faculty as well as opportunities to corporately imagine new means by which students’ spiritual formation will occur. As these activities are described, so are the learnings that we gleaned vis-à-vis the issue that we defined at the outset.

The projects included for the first goal of faculty conversation on their spiritual stories were the following:

1. *Faculty Community Events:* Getting together on a social level was essential to continuing the theme of community and cultivating the growing sense of belonging that is vital for a faculty to be able to assess its role in spiritual formation in such a Christian community as Gordon-Conwell. These shared events varied in nature, some being with faculty alone and others with faculty and families. Though full attendance rarely occurred given schedule demands and campus locales, providing these opportunities was nonetheless symbolic and gave moments in which we could suspend the busyness of the faculty for a social moment. These included times of celebrating vocational milestones for those who have published books, presented papers or reached anniversaries of service to the seminary. Food—a metaphor for community—was provided at many of the monthly faculty meetings. Other events included the two history nights for younger faculty, once in 2003 and once in 2004. The intent of these evenings was to invite faculty that have been at the seminary for less than five years to meet for dinner at the dean’s home and hear from some senior faculty talk about “family history.” These evenings, based on the notion of telling our story, did not spare exposing the blemishes in the history of the school, balancing these darker days with its heydays. It was as if we were hearing rarely-shared stories of our ancestry in ways that connected us to generations past. During the holidays over the period of the Lexington Seminar grant, the theme of the annual Christmas luncheons became “What Christmas Meant at My House.” Each year three faculty members were selected to recount stories of their childhood Christmases. What probably should not come as a surprise, given the focus on telling one’s story, was that several of these family Christmas tales were times when faculty shared of the pains as well as the joys in their Christmases growing up.

2. *2003 Faculty Retreat: A Spiritual Heritage Trip:* As noted earlier in this report, the theme of spiritual formation within the faculty members themselves and of the students they teach was the theme of the 2003 faculty retreat. This retreat spanned two days and one night and included a New England excursion of evangelical history. Guided by church historian Garth Rosell, sites were visited throughout Northeast Massachusetts and the Connecticut River Valley that are part of the history of such notable figures in American religious history as Whitefield, Edwards, Bradstreet and Moody. Through these discussions, faculty were given occasions to connect their individual and shared stories through four intentional components of the retreat. First, during the rides between sites on the chartered coaches, certain faculty members were assigned ten minute spots to share their personal journeys of faith. Many of these “testimonials” opened the lives of faculty members to their colleagues in ways that typically do not occur in the seminary routine. Comments in retrospect were that these were some of the more serendipitous moments of the retreat. Second, mini-lectures were given by the faculty on evangelical history in New England at most of the historical landmarks and on the coaches covering such subjects as “The Revival Tradition in Scripture,” “The Missionary Vision of D. L. Moody,” and “Mary Lyon and Women’s Education in America.” Third, a former faculty member, Robert Dvorak, was invited to join the retreat and lead several Hymn Sings. In this capacity, he connected the faculty to the revivalistic and evangelical shared tradition as well as demonstrating the importance of such hymnody to American religious history. Finally, each meal was a time for lectures and presentations to be suspended and for faculty to interact with each other and their spouses, who were also invited to attend the retreat. During the evening meal in North Hampton, a birthday cake surprised those four faculty members who that year were celebrating turning 50. Overall, this retreat (accompanied also by a number of Trustees) had as its objective leading faculty to new levels of conversations over the idea of shared and individual stories of faith.
3. *Guided Discussions with the Board of Trustees:* In recent years there has been an increased interest by our Board of Trustees to hear from the faculty about their vision for the school and its students. This has happened piecemeal in the past, but through the theme of spiritual formation the faculty began a series of one-hour conversations at one of the three trustee meetings each year of the project. We realized how imperative it was for the trustees, who have not shared in the Lexington Seminar project, to hear from the faculty first hand the matters that they have been thinking through, as prompted by the grant. This has led to conversations within the governing board as they mulled over issues similar to those considered in Maine.

The second goal of the project was renewing the sense that the classroom is a place for spiritual formation. In doing so, several projects were taken on, including:

1. *Window into My Classroom: Faculty-Led Discussions on Spiritual Formation and Teaching:* Over the course of the grant, discussions took place during regularly-scheduled monthly faculty meetings called: “A Window into My Classroom.”

The purpose of these conversations was to allow a faculty member to share for ten minutes an insight about teaching that they have developed over the years with the intention of addressing ways spiritual formation can be transferred through what is taught in a course. Following each ten-minute discussion, the chair of the faculty meeting opened the floor for responses to these ideas. This began to change the culture of a business-oriented faculty meeting to one where we share with each other that which we care most about, i.e., teaching so that students are best prepared to be effective ministers. This process, underway since the Lexington Seminar in June 2002, was intended to restructure faculty meetings so that the “business” is streamlined and more opportunity is given to substantive discussion. Faculty discussed ideas such as: 1) Vulnerability: how transparent should a faculty member be, especially when teaching a part of the course where she or he has less certainty of the subject matter, 2) Scripture memorization: how this technique can assist students in the integration and long-term biblical application of the discipline taught, and 3) What I Learned from the Good and the Bad: a faculty member’s reflection into lessons about teaching he had gleaned by reflecting on the best and the worst teaching models he had through his years of school.

2. *Book of Exhortations*: We deliberated on some ways in which to give faculty members a final opportunity to speak into the lives of the graduating students pastorally. Presented to the faculty was an idea for them to submit a brief entry into what we would call the Book of Exhortations, a compilation of wisdom from faculty to graduating seminarians. Begun in 2003 and continued in 2004, this publication contained insights from professors on “one bit of advice” they would like to offer these students as they left seminary for ministry. The students indicated that they treasured this book, creatively laid out and bound, and would—we trust—return again and again to the counsel of their professors who advised them with words like, “Stay in one church long enough to make a difference,” “Don’t be reckless in the use of what you’ve learned. Don’t put up with people who are reckless with what they’ve learned,” and “Don’t let your relationship with the Lord go stale and crusty. Maybe you have a genius brain; maybe you have natural charisma. But you never know when either one might fail you. But not the Lord.”
3. *New Student Orientation theme: “Joining the Journey:”* Even beyond the timeframe of the Lexington Seminar grant, the fruit of its intention has resulted in continued thinking of how stories relate to our understanding of spiritual formation. As a direct result of this revitalized way of recreating models for teaching and learning, the orientation session in 2004 was transformed from what had been an “information dump” for two days into a semester-long enculturation process whereby students enter the heritage and vision of Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. In this orientation program, the faculty, president and deans communicated to students that their journey motif will become central to their seminary experience as they walk through new doorways of academic rigor, a deepening of the soul and a building of practical skills for ministry. In this journey, students heard from us that Gordon-Conwell would be a place where

they were prepared for ministry that balances the highest levels of scholarship, the pursuit of Christlikeness and the proficiencies necessary to fulfill their calling. Furthermore, the journey is not meant to be taken alone, therefore faculty have been assembled in small groups with students in advising capacities whereas in years past this has been done on a one-on-one assembly line fashion. The willingness for faculty to look anew at what had been old and tired, i.e., new student orientation, was one more indication that marked headway is being made toward a natural conversation of spiritual life that transcends disciplines and typical classroom boundaries.

HOW THE PROJECT HELPED SHARPEN OUR CONCERNS AROUND THE PROCESS OF TEACHING AND LEARNING AND WISDOM GLEANED

As this paper is being written, the long-term effects of this grant are still being processed. We suspect that the project affected the way in which faculty teach, but our suspicions are anecdotal. If positive feedback is a good indicator, and often with faculty even this is a milestone, then early indicators are encouraging.

This project was built intuitively rather than scientifically, however. Consequently, its evaluations will come from the same perceptions. We are convinced that conversations about spiritual nourishment matter, and they have to take place narratively on the individual level through personal testimony as well as on the community level through shared heritage.

A good sign is that at the end of the grant period, as noted in an earlier section, the components launched by the grant have not ceased, though some of them have changed in appearance. The post-grant continuation of the project has involved establishing a further sense of the unique and shared spiritual community Gordon-Conwell as well as how this community dimension is best assessed. The project in some ways is a microcosm of the larger issue, in which we are always asking ourselves the question: *“What is the spiritual picture we would paint of a Gordon-Conwell graduate and how are we examining ourselves to know how and if we are realizing this goal?”* This project has given us funding and vision for occasions to assess our progress related to this goal with a focus on one area, i.e., spiritual formation of the student through our own spiritual stories. It is expected that this will create a level of discourse among faculty—50 percent of whom are new since 1997—that will continue in years to come.

In some ways this grant has been an investment to provide occasions to cultivate a culture of assessment. The process must, as we reflect on wisdom gleaned and lessons learned, continue to reinvent the ways in which we talk among ourselves as a Christian community about all that we each cherish but so infrequently share. For the immediate gains of this grant to have staying power, the leadership of the seminary must continually provide intentional moments for conversations with faculty, it must allow for innovation where heretofore there has been rigidity, and it must foster a culture where trial and error is encouraged, where failure is okay and successes are celebrated. The end result must be

evident progress toward an institutional culture of spiritual vitality so that what is learned in the classroom is lived in the lives of students, not just during their years at seminary, but throughout their vocations in ministry.

Regarding what would be done differently, we would have been more overt than covert. Those who made up the Lexington Seminar Task Force were—by and large—participants in the 2002 Northeast Harbor gathering. As this was a special time for each one and had a life of its own, we knew it would be difficult to convey without blank stares or jealousy how meaningful those five days were. As a result, the approach was to “surprise” faculty with these events as they happened rather than building a case and laying out clearly the why and the how. This, in some planners minds, diluted the impact. We also learned through trial and error that balance needed to be given to respecting the faculty’s inclinations toward critical scholarship with the new ventures into testimonial stories. In the Spiritual Heritage Trip for example, if we had only had mini-lectures on historical milestones and did not allow the faculty to share their own pilgrimages of faith, then the 2003 Faculty Retreat would have been little more than a traveling academic conference. If, on the other hand, testimonies were shared outside of the context of lectures, then many would have felt the retreat was trivialized and lacked the academic heft that faculty desire.

As other seminaries read into our grant report and hear our story about stories, we would want them to hear that we fail as much as we succeed in moving toward a community ethos of spiritual conversation. The counsel to others who are seeking an environment of spiritual conversation would be to move carefully in this direction through simple activities, don’t be afraid when initiatives fail, and celebrate the ones that succeed. Also, do not try to bifurcate the academic from the testimonial. Faculty cannot nor should not be forced into conversations that coerce spiritual story telling. Yet we have witnessed that it can be done and—done right—with deep impact even among the skeptics.