

• MALCOLM L. WARFORD •

Introduction

Teaching is often viewed as a solitary venture of self and subject, but on another level we know that both teaching and learning are a matter of relationships significantly shaped by the community in which they occur. For theological teachers, this community is the seminary, and today's seminary reflects the turbulent context of the church and society it is meant to serve. New student constituencies, multiple institutional commitments, and severe fiscal pressures, all occurring within a world of continuing change, present theological seminaries with challenges demanding meaningful response. But the responses are as mixed as those who offer them. Some theological teachers yearn for halcyon days in which schools express long-established traditions; others are more willing to embrace change but are unsure how. Still others are so overwhelmed by the sheer volume of their tasks that they have no time to address the critical issues facing their vocation, and all of us are confronted by the uncertainty of the future that stretches out before us.

The purpose of this book and the project out of which it emerged is to engage, in this context of change and uncertainty, crucial questions of theological teaching and learning. In framing these questions, we invariably return to four critical issues: diversity, formation, institutional identity, and assessment.

DIVERSITY: RECONSIDERING THE COMMONPLACES

The new student constituencies that theological schools are endeavoring not only to serve but to embrace reflect a wide spectrum of cultural backgrounds, personal histories, and theological commitments, and they are marked as well by formation in a culture in which the traditional foundations for learning cannot be taken for granted. Students come out of differing educational experiences that have shaped their forms of learning and self-understanding. They enter with varied abilities, uneven formation in the Christian faith, and the conviction that the seminary will fulfill their needs, no matter how diverse. Schools that once could take for granted that their distinctive theological traditions defined their essential reality now find it necessary to figure out how to maintain their heritage and yet at the same time express an ecumenical reality that is represented by increasing numbers of students.

At one time, seminaries dealt with the issue of diversity as a matter of accommodation; that is, the problem was defined in terms of how the school could make room for other perspectives and traditions. This approach no longer seems viable, neither on institutional nor on theological grounds. On the basis of institutional needs, most denominational seminaries cannot exist without recruiting students from other traditions, and these students cannot be viewed as guests but must be recognized as full participants in the life and ethos of the institution.

In responding to new constituencies and actively seeking their presence, seminaries are called to see their willingness to respond as a willingness to be transformed as well. How this transformation is discerned requires inquiry into the distinctiveness of each school's central theological stance and how this distinctiveness is sustained, revised, or made new in the midst of "strangers" who are now part of the household. Added to this theological and ecclesial work are the accompanying issues presented by the diversity of the students themselves in terms of ethnicity, culture, class, gender, age, and sexual orientation. Further, many students attend seminaries part-time, and a significant number of them are older adults who represent various places on the ideological spectrum. This enriches as well as complicates the wide-ranging educational backgrounds of theological students, especially as other entering seminarians come directly from college with the differing sensibilities and assumptions of contemporary youth culture.

Although students come with a commitment to ministry, their understanding of how they are to be prepared for this work and calling are often different from the traditional assumptions in theological faculties. Many students enroll in seminaries with what some observers have characterized as an "expectation for efficiency" in their theological education that will make it possible

for them to juggle competing demands of employment and family commitments. This expectation, however, does not necessarily include the kind of time for study and reflection that lies closest to the hearts of most theological educators. A fundamental difference often exists, then, between the assumptions of faculty and students.

In an earlier generation, seminaries often recommended the kinds of courses that students seeking a theology degree ought to have taken before applying for seminary admission. Entering students, for example, who had little familiarity with the history of philosophy, were sometimes required to take a course specifically designed to help them meet this lack of philosophical background. Few theological seminaries today would find such a requirement possible.

The educational problems, however, are not just a matter of making up for a lack of knowledge in certain fields; instead, a more pervasive issue is that many students arrive without basic rhetorical and academic skills. The theological teacher's responsibility, or so it seems to many educators, has become more than just communicating a particular area of knowledge; it has become a responsibility to equip students with skills they should have acquired long before entering seminary—such basic abilities as comprehending a text, expressing a point of view, writing an essay, following standards of research and documentation, and knowing the elements of grammar and punctuation.

Such problems are widespread throughout higher education, and theological education, in this instance, reflects the larger cultural context. But theological education accepts another role beyond those which other institutions of higher education usually accept. Theological schools have come to expect to play an increasing role in a student's formation as a person of faith.

FORMATION: ADDRESSING ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

The seminary is now required to be in itself a place of basic formation in the gospel as well as a community that equips men and women for the church's ministries. Protestant theological students often enter seminaries with limited experience in the life of a congregation and almost no knowledge of biblical and theological traditions. While this tends to be less so in theological schools where ecclesiastical endorsement is required before admission, it is an issue even in those schools. This trend represents a significant departure from a longstanding tradition in which the congregation was seen as the place of formation in faith. For generations, both the church and the seminary took it for granted that theological students were essentially formed in the practices of the Christian life through their nurture as children and youth in local congregations. They came to seminary having been shaped by Sunday schools, youth groups, col-

lege religious programs, and continuing family traditions of faith. In contemporary culture, however, this background applies only to some students because many have not been part of this ecology of Protestant ecclesial life. Seminaries, therefore, are increasingly responsible for an even larger proportion of students' spiritual formation. This new reality fundamentally changes the nature of what can be taken for granted in the classroom and raises critical questions about what is required for faithful teaching and learning.

These dynamics of theological teaching and learning are significantly shaped by the emergence of new technologies. The rapid rise of computers within theological education changes many of the fundamental patterns of education. In particular, this technological change is focused in the development of off-site learning programs that may take the form of television-linked classrooms in multiple locations and in the creation of Web-based courses conducted completely online. These trends are intensified by the establishment of "smart classrooms" that bring audio and visual resources into everyday coursework and in the redefinition and redesign of libraries far beyond that of providing access to printed texts and documents. The central question is what these new technologies and educational settings imply for the nature of formation. For example, how does an off-campus course require us to rethink our assumptions about community? Can we preserve a sense of community in the midst of distance learning? Must we reconstitute community in a different form?

While schools are interested in strengthening their educational programs through technology, many have not yet come to grips with the issues that are connected with this technological development. Some schools have seen technology as a way of extending what they are already doing, such as televising a traditional classroom. What schools are beginning to realize, however, is that technology is not neutral; it brings its own pedagogical assumptions and culture. How a school makes use of various technological possibilities is as much an educational issue as a technical one. For example, is it possible for televised presentations and electronically linked classes to increase the depth of students' learning and formation? There is a sense of possibility inherent within the use of computers and Web-based learning, but there is also the nascent realization that, like all technologies, these have to be guided by core educational values. The search for technologies appropriate for teaching and learning, the need for faculty education in the use of technology, and the desire to understand technology's impact on students' learning are just a few of the pressing challenges we face.

At another level, issues of formation in theological education are defined not only by the changing nature of students and the emergence of new technologies but also by the shifting style and ethos of seminary life. As denominational structures and programs have been reduced, local congregations and

various ecclesiastical bodies have turned to seminaries for educational programs that were once the responsibility of other agencies or the local church itself. The cumulative effect of these changes has been to shift the taken-for-granted character of theological education. Diverse constituencies, distance learning, commuting students, and multiple programmatic commitments create a sometimes overburdened institutional context for faculty and students. It is a context that requires the rethinking of basic educational assumptions.

At the same time that theological schools face complex educational questions, the assumptions of theology itself have become more problematic. On any given faculty there is now significant theological diversity that makes it difficult to state curricular principles and agree on foundations for theological learning. Until the 1960s (and beyond that time for many theological schools), the seminary curriculum typically reflected a basic theological consensus. In the 1950s, one could look through the catalogues of many mainline Protestant schools and discern the outlines of a common theological perspective. The organization of the various fields of study, the flow of required courses, and the relative weight given to different disciplines expressed understandings of revelation, authority, and ministry that were largely shared by the faculty or at least held by a dominant majority. With the increased diversity of theological methods and models, this kind of unanimity in curricular assumptions and design is virtually impossible to achieve in most schools. How a faculty lives creatively and faithfully together with such diversity is a major and continuing question of institutional life.

This situation is complicated by the dramatic growth of religious studies as the primary influence in graduate theological programs. In this regard, doctoral candidates tend to be more prepared for teaching in a university department of religion than in a denominational seminary. Where once it was assumed that most, if not all, theological teachers would be ordained ministers who held the B.D. or M.Div. degree before moving on to doctoral study, that is increasingly not the case. The situation is made even more complicated by the fact that fewer theologians have served as parish ministers for any significant amount of time. While this new situation encourages a less clerical tone in theological education, it also means that younger scholars and teachers sometimes must be formed in basic pastoral understandings that once were taken for granted.

INSTITUTIONAL IDENTITY: ENGAGING MULTIPLE AIMS

All of these educational and theological issues are set within institutions that are often fragile and torn by competing needs. Out of the need to develop new sources of revenue and the effort to equip the church for ministry, theologi-

cal seminaries find it difficult to avoid multiple and often competing programmatic commitments. Many schools are beginning to realize that, without necessarily intending to, they have become more like resource centers than schools defined primarily by practices of teaching and learning that require time for study and reflection. In this regard, a basic question that must be asked is at what point does a school move so far in the direction of programmatic overload that it loses its sense of distinct purpose?

One of the reasons the church at large is in significant difficulty is the absence of any real, sustained conversation about the essential theological issues that are the foundation of its life. When the church is so consumed by its own business that it cannot stop long enough to reflect on where it has come from and where it might be going, then it has forfeited its substance. The theological school is not the only place where this theological inquiry should occur, but it is an essential community for nurturing that conversation throughout the diverse ministries of the church.

This situation calls for a new intentionality about the use of faculty time as the seminary tries to respond to the concerns of the church, the expectations of the academy, and the changing culture of the school itself. As schools take on new institutional commitments to off-campus courses, distance learning, multiple degree programs, and various forms of continuing education, they stretch already slim resources. Many of the changes occurring in theological education are happening with little thought about the long-term consequences or the cumulative effect on existing programs. The assumption is that new programs can be added to existing academic commitments. But this often puts vulnerable institutions even more at risk.

Less than a generation ago, most seminaries were modest organizations of varying levels of competency. As institutions, they followed nineteenth-century institutional models in which the administration was, in effect, the president, who more often than not was a member and head of the faculty. A development director, sometimes called a vice president, and a secretary, if there was one, staffed fundraising efforts. Recruitment was handled informally, and public relations were the responsibility of whoever was available. Various student services were usually assumed by faculty or a part-time dean of students, but few institutions had created the kind of student services staff we now see. Maintenance issues were largely deferred, and the buildings and grounds staff focused on repairs, patching, and making do. The board of trustees met infrequently and was composed primarily of clergy and church lay leaders who were not necessarily key benefactors. Boards functioned as courts of appeal and places of general oversight, but little was expected by way of fundraising or policy development. The academic affairs of the school were the prerogative of the faculty, and the president supposedly took care of everything else.

These administrative patterns changed quickly when fiscal realities began to require new ways of operating, especially as denominational support diminished or, in many cases, disappeared entirely. More extensive administrative structures were required to handle the emerging expectations of congregations, various public relationships, and new constituencies of support. The role of the board of trustees grew as the seminary had to cultivate more direct contributions from individual donors and as the board itself became more aware of its own fiduciary responsibilities. These various dynamics of administrative growth soon began to upset the balances of power within the institution, and tensions emerged, especially as faculty felt that new staff appointments were taking over responsibilities long assumed by faculty members themselves.

There are, of course, variations in this complicated landscape. Evangelical schools tied to more conservative theological traditions have tended to prosper while more liberal mainline schools—with significant exceptions—have struggled with destabilizing forces. At the same time, theological schools of varying theological commitments that are located in regions of economic growth have been buoyed by this rising tide and generally find themselves in a much different institutional place than their peer schools in less dynamic regions. Differing though the landscape may be for particular schools and traditions, the increased levels of institutional change have contributed to the volatility of the environment in which most theological schools function, and each institution's struggle with identity—the definition of purpose and mission, the creation and abandonment of programs, and the endless search for fiscal stability—has profoundly affected the practices of teaching and learning.

ASSESSMENT: FIDELITY TO OUR INTENTIONS

Entwined with the three critical issues just discussed is a responsibility that all seminaries struggle to fulfill—educational assessment, the responsibility to ascertain what we are doing and how well we are doing it. Such an evaluative task is more complex than making a precipitate judgment about what is good or bad. For inherent within theological education resides the continuing and ethical obligation to learn how to do it better and more faithfully. Fulfilling this obligation is an expression of our fidelity to the vision that has called us into being as a community of faith and learning.

In one sense, the responsibility for assessment lies within the nature of religious commitment itself, and we can claim a certain theological impetus for our evaluative commitments. But the more immediate reason for the current emphasis on assessment comes from the public community, and most of all from the federal government itself. The regional accrediting bodies and the Association of Theological Schools (ATS) have had to be responsive to gov-

ernment requirements for measurements of institutional effectiveness and integrity of academic programs in their member institutions. Finances are attached to these expectations because government funding of various scholarship programs used by students depends on credible evaluative systems being in place.

The expectation for assessment is fueled also by increasing church concern about ministry programs and whether the money spent on theological schools is really worth the cost. In some denominations, the question is whether the schools themselves follow a sufficiently orthodox line; in others, the question is whether the curriculum is relevant enough for the contemporary practice of ministry. With increasing calls for nontraditional routes to ordination and the actual development of alternative models for theological education within denominations and local congregations, theological schools are often pressed to demonstrate effectiveness to church officials and donors.

In recent revisions of regional and ATS accrediting standards, assessment is a major component of decennial self-study reports. Schools have to demonstrate they have designed and implemented evaluation models. Expressing intentions is not enough; schools are expected to provide some kind of evidence that the stated goals of degree programs are being achieved. The aim here is not some expectation of perfection; instead, it is the assumption that theological schools will take seriously their responsibility for the quality and the faithfulness of their programs, institutional practices, and overall aims.

In a larger sense, assessment is not something apart from the vocation of teaching; it is of its essence. The difficulty, of course, is determining how such essential assessment is to be carried out. Some schools try to impose quantitative measurements that are often at odds with educational aims, while others try to avoid any measurement at all because they are not convinced that what exists can be evaluated. Sometimes assessment is reduced to an almost punitive level that demoralizes faculty and staff. In this regard, much needs to be done in creating forms of evaluation, especially course evaluation, that are occasions for learning and not some kind of political poll that measures popularity but misses the essential questions of theological education. Each school must define and implement its own distinctive means of assessment and then engage the learning from this evaluative process in a way that informs and reforms educational practice.

FACULTY WORK AND CALLING

Formulating faithful and workable responses to the issues of diversity, formation, institutional identity, and assessment is made even more difficult by the

solitary nature of faculty life. While faculty often meet together, the practices of mutual learning are not all that common. In the midst of the activities and sometimes frenzied schedules of academic institutions, there is not much evidence of sustained collaborative effort on fundamental educational questions. However, in order to address the issues that have been named, it is crucial that faculty develop collaborative practices.

The irony is that while seminary faculties spend a lot of time together, this familiarity does not necessarily result in friendship, common learning, or awareness of each other's deepest commitments. For example, as the role of the various academic guilds has been strengthened in recent years, theological professors have tended to see others in the same scholarly field as their primary intellectual colleagues and not those colleagues with whom they serve on a given faculty. Many seminary faculties seem to have little sense that they share a common vocation. In this regard, Timothy Fuller (1989, 3) observes the following:

Academic institutions, it would appear, are in varying degrees disintegrated communities of scholars. They remain places physically set apart for teaching and learning, but entering their premises no longer guarantees encounter with a self-understanding, however mysterious and complex it may initially seem, that gradually discloses a distinctive manner of activity that really does set them apart. What has been obscured, if not lost, is the idea of a school, a college, a university.

As Fuller goes on to suggest, this loss is not “that what is missing is an organizing, energizing goal for education” (3); instead, what is missing is the essential practice of teaching and learning—namely, conversations that matter. This description of education as conversation is identified particularly with the work of the British philosopher Michael Oakeshott.

Oakeshott (1989) argues that while academic institutions are not the only places in society where learning occurs, he asserts that these institutions should have “a special manner of engaging in the pursuit of learning” (97). This special manner was once cultivated by the fact that most faculty lived on or near school grounds. This proximity helped form these individual teachers and scholars as a community in which “a tradition of learning . . . [could be] . . . preserved and extended” (97). In effect, the faculty lived together in a “home of learning” (97). This kind of community was characterized most of all as a place of conversation (Fuller 1989, 12–13).

“The pursuit of learning,” Oakeshott writes, “is not a race in which the competitors jockey for the best place, it is not even an argument or a symposium, it is a conversation” (98). The challenge to theological education is how to reclaim the school as a place of conversation sustained by colleagues who constitute a community of teaching and learning. Since most faculty now live

off campus and follow not only the familiar commuting patterns of most in our society but also often share the fragmented consciousness and harried pace that characterize our culture, it is often difficult for faculty members to find time to be together in meaningful ways. Aside from reinstating faculty housing on campus—an impracticality for most schools and no guarantee of collegial renaissance—how can faculty, given today’s social context, form a way of being together that approximates the collegial ideal we espouse but so often fail to embody?

In this regard, as Timothy Fuller suggests (3–6), we may need fewer new programs and more renewed intentionality about what we are already doing and how we can learn to do it better. This perspective, however, should not be read as an appeal to the past. For while some schools may be able to renew traditional residential and full-time models of seminary life, most will need to envision and establish contemporary forms that will give new expression to what we have valued most in the inherited structures of theological education.

Within the context of the Christian faith, the conversation that Oakeshott describes is most of all defined by *metanoia*, the change of mind and heart that constitutes the essential conversion of our lives. This kind of transformative learning is at the heart of all Christian education, and as such, theological education is called to understand its vocation within this context. Theological teaching is not for itself alone, but for the church’s ministries. Sadly enough, though, far too many seminary graduates disparage their experiences as theological students and distance themselves quickly from the school as a significant community in their lives. For these, the seminary is removed from the congregation, and the theological teacher is marginal to their own sense of the Christian life. As pastors, they view their theological education as disconnected from what they do in ministry. We may know countless exceptions to this perspective, but we also know that it is a way of seeing that is prevalent throughout the church, and while our first inclination may be to respond defensively, we need to resist such temptation and engage the issue with energy and imagination—and with the understanding that the task of re-creating the relationship between the church’s ministries and theological education is a collaborative effort that must be addressed by seminaries, congregations, and denominational structures.

The issue, actually, is as old as the idea of schooling itself. As Pierre Hadot observes (2002, 13), it began with the Sophists who “invented education in an artificial environment.” While the earliest classical philosophical tradition understood knowing as lived experience rather than abstract thought, the Sophists created the school as the primary place for learning. The earlier emphasis on learning that occurs by formation in a community’s life—its values, institutional practices, and traditions—was superseded by teaching and

learning in the formal setting of the school. Ever since, we have struggled with reconnecting knowledge and experience in the kind of practical wisdom that shapes our souls and forms the practices of our lives. For theological teachers, these dynamics call us to rethink the nature of our work and reclaim the sense of calling that first led us to this vocation.

In a memoir of her father, James Hastings Nichols, who was a church historian and academic dean of Princeton Seminary, novelist Sue Miller (2003, 54) writes:

After his death I will read a testimonial from a student describing his quiet, careful *listening* in his office hours, and I will recognize this extraordinary generosity. You never knew—never even had a sense of—what he put aside to give himself to your pressing concerns. But he was *there*. When you asked him to be, he was absolutely there.

For those acquainted with James Hastings Nichols, this description is easily recognizable as the person we knew at varying degrees of familiarity. It is the image of a scholar who was the kind of theological teacher many aspire to become. However, if testimonies of many current professors are true, and there is little reason to doubt them, it is increasingly difficult to approximate this ideal. The changing character of theological education, the growing multiplicity of institutional aims and programs, and the impact of diverse issues that press in upon theological teachers establish a situation in which our reach exceeds our grasp of the kind of teaching for the church's ministries that we would most of all want to embody. While earlier generations also faced issues of time and changing expectations, the context in which they functioned seemed more stable. It is now apparent that the increased pace of seminary life and the widening range of institutional commitments are eroding traditional patterns of faculty life and work.

Our hope for addressing this situation comes out of our vocation itself, and Sue Miller provides us with a clue for achieving that hope. As she speaks of her father—"he was patient and respectful—a born teacher, I think, because he was a learner himself" (60)—we are reminded of the essential connection between our teaching and our commitment to learning. It is this fundamental commitment that we must draw upon when we address the crucial issues we face as teachers in the church and as members of communities of teachers in particular theological seminaries. It is doubtful that external pressures will lessen significantly for faculties. If we are waiting for someone outside ourselves to change our situation, then that wait will be endless and frustrating with the predictable outcome being the increased fragmentation and isolation of faculty from each other and from the purposes of our lives. In order to renew the practices of theological teaching and learning, we must understand the shared character of these practices and the institutional contexts in which they find a home.



Most importantly, we must address the multiple issues that frame theological education through the sort of imaginative theological work, informed by educational research and practice, that constitutes practical wisdom. This is the aim of the authors of this book.

