Faith and learning: An exchange: Forming ministers

by Barbara G. Wheeler in the June 17, 1998 issue

Ronald White does not state the precise problem to which his proposals are addressed. From comments salted through his article, I take his thesis to be something like this: *The central purpose of a seminary is the theological education of religious leaders. In traditions like ours (Presbyterian), professional leadership is exercised primarily (though not exclusively) through the ministry of word and sacrament, which is usually (but not always) conducted in local congregations. To carry out the seminary's central purpose, faculty members should have both motive and capacity to provide theological preparation for ordained pastoral ministry and related roles. There are signs that some who seek positions in seminaries are not oriented to, or equipped for, this basic teaching task.*

I agree with White about the purpose of a theological school and the challenge that faces those who prepare future faculty for seminary teaching and who shape the development of the newly hired. I identified several trends that seem to be eroding the vocational commitment of seminary faculty members and perhaps their ability to teach "to" any particular purpose.

I do not think, however, that White's proposed solution--to require substantial parish ministry experience for future teachers or remedial "sabbaticals" in congregations for those who lack it--will serve as automatically or universally as he thinks to (1) motivate seminary faculty members for their work or (2) enable them to do it effectively.

(1) *Motivation*. What disposes seminary faculty to care about the theological formation of religious leaders? Though there have been no studies of the relationship between background and training, on the one hand, and the vocational self-understanding and commitment of seminary faculty, on the other, many theological educators have collected anecdotal evidence. White's examples suggest a correlation between ministry in congregations and commitment to theological

teaching as ministerial formation: the longer and more recent the faculty member's ministry experience, the greater the zeal for shaping students as ministers.

My own anecdotes present a more complicated picture. Over the years, as I have interviewed ministers, I have usually had the occasion to ask what and who kept them focused during seminary on the formation of ministerial identity. The faculty members they named had various pedigrees. Some (but not large numbers) had served extensive periods in parish ministry. (Interestingly, in my interviews and in many seminaries' surveys of their own graduates, practical ministry courses, which are most often taught by experienced ministers, were rated lower as ministry preparation than other instruction.) A few of the teachers who were cited as emphasizing ministry as the educational goal, including some of the most influential, were persons who either chose or (in the case of women in many traditions) had no choice but the lay state. The majority of faculty named were ordained but had spent relatively little time as professional leaders of congregations.

What all these teachers had in common, according to their former students' descriptions, was a passion for the core acts of ministry: proclaiming the gospel and distributing the gifts of God. These acts are often--perhaps most often--based in local churches, but they occur in many other settings as well. The faculty who were ministry advocates not only told students that ministry is a great opportunity and privilege but also enacted it in the classroom and the life of the school. Their teaching was conducted as ministry. In light of these reports, I am less scandalized than White is by the statement, "My scholarship is my church." Whether the speaker belongs in a seminary depends on whether she means that the love of learning is a substitute for or a taproot of ministerial commitment.

(2) *Capacity*. White says that more extensive exposure to the demands of the practice of ministry will equip seminary faculty to "integrate" the separate fields of theological study and make those studies more evidently relevant for ministry. The argument presupposes a coherence among theological fields and areas that will become visible from the standpoint of ministry practice. It is highly desirable, White suggests, for the experienced teacher to go to that standpoint first and from there to shape her subject matter in ways that communicate its coherence with other studies and its relevance for ministry. It is better for the teacher to do this than for the student to be saddled with the burden of integration after the fact.

But what if the hoped-for coherence and relevance simply do not exist? The literature on theological education published over the past two decades (beginning with Edward Farley's *Theologia: The Fragmentation and Unity of Theological Education*) argues convincingly that the standard theological curriculum is a haphazard collection of studies handed down from earlier periods and now entrenched in separate academic guilds. The pieces cannot be fit together by anyone from any vantage point, because the ones we have now were never part of any larger whole in the first place. What once held theological study together and arranged its pieces in understandable order has been lost: theologia, theology in the older sense of wisdom that disposes the knower to God and that deeply forms the knower for Christian life and ministry.

If Farley and the other observers of theological education are right, the reform of theological education cannot be accomplished by each faculty member acting on his own to reattach his subject matter to ministry. Rather, the reform of theological study as integrated education will require that the whole faculty address together the conceptual problem of what pieces and pattern of study and action might reconstitute theologia--deeply formative understanding of God.

Will the past and present immersion of faculty members in congregational ministry help this process? Of course. The loss of theologia afflicts the whole church, not just its schools. Its recovery will not be possible without the participation of some faculty who know very well, from leadership in or study of local churches, how local communities of believers have struggled with the problem and what progress they have made. But sending too many faculty out for ministry immersion experiences could distract the whole faculty from the process of reconceiving theologia together. More serious still, a rigid requirement of personal experience in parish ministry might entrench the "clerical paradigm," which Farley and other writers argue has contributed heavily to the current fragmentation and disarray by forcing every subject to justify itself as "theory" for some practical function of ministry.

White and other advocates of universal ministry experience and parish sabbaticals for seminary faculty make it sound as if these expedients will by themselves repair the confusion of purpose and loss of formative power in theological education. As I have tried to show, they will not, and requiring them of all faculty might hurt as much as or more than it helps.

Reorienting and reforming seminary education to make it more adequate theological preparation for Christian life and ministry is a very complex challenge that will best

be addressed by faculty who bring different kinds of education, training, professional experience and perspective to a common goal: forming future religious leaders in the knowledge and love of God.