Faith and learning: An exchange: A plea for integration

by Ronald C. White in the June 17, 1998 issue

In a recent search to fill a position in New Testament, the search committee at my seminary had difficulty finding candidates who could integrate learning with faith. Of the more than 140 candidates considered, few had served full time in ministry, however broadly defined. A trustee on the search committee, a person with a Ph.D. who had both taught in a seminary and served as a Christian educator in a parish, held our feet to the fire as we interviewed candidate after candidate. We asked the candidate who many of us believed had the most impressive curriculum vitae to speak about her involvement in the church. The candidate replied: “My scholarship is my church.”

All of us in theological education are indebted to Barbara Wheeler and Auburn Seminary’s Center for the Study of Theological Education. But because of experiences like the above I am not as sanguine about the problems facing theological education as she seems to be in her article on the formation of seminary faculties (“The faculty of the future: How are they being shaped?,” February 4-11).

Wheeler is quite helpful in convening a conversation about the preparation and recruitment of faculty. She identifies a major problem facing theological education: “Will these [faculty] be trained and formed in ways that equip them to prepare religious leaders for the future?” She begins answering in the affirmative by showing that most candidates for seminary teaching positions continue to be trained in graduate programs “located in a seminary.”

If the issue were only location. A number of other questions need to be asked about training and formation. The questions and issues are multifaceted, but they all come together around issues of integrating faith and learning.

To show that the majority of candidates are not being trained in religious studies departments does not get at the heart of a much more complex issue. The better index is curriculum.

One hears often that there is no tension between theological and religious studies. I am a graduate of a religious studies program (Princeton University) and until two years ago was teaching in the history department at a university (UCLA). It was clear to me that in moving from the university to a seminary I was entering a world with a rather different curriculum and different pedagogical assumptions. Seminaries, although holding much in common with the rest of higher education, are schools of the churches. At UCLA, in courses in intellectual and religious history, I wanted students to appreciate the ethos and spirit of the texts we were reading, but I tried not to confuse the lectern with the pulpit.

To teach with integrity in a seminary calls for a different approach. In teaching history I seek to engage the faith dimension more fully both in the subject matter and in the students. The challenge in seminary teaching is to help students make connections between, say, the Great Awakening or the social gospel and the issues and practices of ministry.

Yes, I want students at both UCLA and San Francisco Theological Seminary to learn to think critically. But in a seminary context I ask students to go one step further. I ask them to think of themselves as wearing the hat of a teacher in a faith tradition. Whether we are in a conversation with Jonathan Edwards or Martin Luther King Jr., I want students to ask how they, as teaching elders in the Reformed tradition, might instruct parishioners.

Second, training and forming future faculty is more than an academic enterprise. We have more and more seminary faculty who have never had full-time experience in ministry. I use the term “full-time” because I believe there is a qualitative difference between being a guest teacher or preacher in a variety of churches and experiencing the day-to-day trials and joys of full-time ministry. More than a decade ago Daniel Jenkins told me that the Scottish universities long had a rule that anyone called to teach in the divinity faculty must have eight years’ experience in parish ministry. This guideline is no longer in effect. A hopeful sign is that in many parts of the Two-Thirds World the conviction at seminaries and theological schools is that professors must have experience in the day-to-day life of ministry to be effective teachers.

A third issue is how we can better discern which candidates are best prepared for scholarship and teaching in seminaries. What surprises me again and again in search processes is that each candidate believes that she or he can teach in a

seminary. Or college. Or university.

In our search we decided we had to discover whether candidates really could teach and write in a seminary held in trust by the church. We reshaped our interviewing process to require each finalist to deliver a homily. We made it clear that we were not expecting our New Testament candidates to be homileticians. We did want to see if candidates could explain and proclaim a biblical text in the context of worship.

Our choice for the position was a young professor who, while possessing an excellent Ph.D. degree from a U.S. university, had also taught in a seminary in Asia where he was expected to be involved in regular ministry in the same congregation every week. His ability to integrate New Testament scholarship and church ministry commended him to our committee.

I am well aware that in the competitive world of scholarship many graduate students believe they cannot spend some years in a parish or campus ministry or hospital chaplaincy. They believe they will sacrifice their opportunity for placement to someone with a longer academic résumé. But sometime, somewhere, the message needs to be sent to graduate students that practical experience is desirable.

A friend with 12 years' experience in the parish and almost two years away from completing a Ph.D. at a divinity school recently found herself sought out for seminary positions for which she did not even apply. She became a finalist without any formal interview. This seminary was seeking someone who balanced excellent academic and ministry preparation. We need to send out the word that practical ministry experience is good capital for seminaries that want to be in partnership with congregations.

What shall we do with faculty who have never had practical experience or for whom that experience was long ago? We are exploring ways to place faculty in ministry sabbaticals. This sabbatical will not take away from regular academic sabbaticals. We hope to place faculty with mentoring pastors who will help them experience the full range of pastoral activity. A younger member of our faculty recently came to me asking if it might be possible to spend time in a parish. This faculty member, an outstanding teacher in a classical discipline, recognized that the absence of experience in ministry was a drawback in preparing others for ministry.

Wheeler calls proposals of this kind "misguided." I believe, on the contrary, that they can be one way of redressing the specialization that defines academic culture. Our

conviction is that such experience will strengthen the teaching of seminarians and thus the church.

I am grateful for the many insights in Wheeler's article. I was especially drawn to her discussion of "commodification." When she speaks of the older understanding of professions as combining vocation and occupation, she could be describing seminary professors whose self-identity was first as ordained ministers and second as professors. In learning about the history of the seminary I now serve, I was struck by the number of professors in earlier decades who went back and forth between seminary and parish. I experienced the strength of this model when the World Council of Churches afforded me a year at Lincoln Theological College in England. Faculty at this Anglican school alternated in differing rhythms between theological colleges and church assignments. We cannot turn the clock back, but we can ask for wholeness of vocation and occupation.

Students plead for the integration of faith and learning. Students respect the competence of faculty who are experts in their fields, but they yearn for professors who can integrate church history, or theology, or New Testament with faith formation and ministry. Sometimes I hear faculty respond by saying the task is up to the students. I believe the process of integration begins with modeling by faculty.

Wheeler suggests that younger faculty decide to pursue their teaching careers because of interest in a subject rather than commitment to broader purposes. The reply we received, "My scholarship is my church," grew out of a graduate education with a singular focus on a field or subject. Wheeler is correct in observing that we cannot simply blame the coming generation of graduate students. Those of us in theological education do need to "temper the process of commodification." The challenge is to so nurture the character and commitments of faculty that teaching integrates learning and faith so as to best serve students and the church.