

RESPONSE TO GORDON SMITH'S
"FORMATION FOR MINISTRY IN A SECULAR AGE"

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As I read and reread Dr. Smith's paper over the previous few weeks, I found myself resonating with his presentation at most every level. I appreciate the candor, the insight, and the recommendations for addressing a number of critical needs in our preparation of clergy for the Church in North America for this and the next generation.

As a child of the Church, growing up in a parsonage in the deep south in the 40's and 50's, I was aware quite early that the Church could and should be "counter-cultural." My pastor father was not from the south, but had married the youngest daughter of a deeply embedded "old south" family. They had met at Nashville First Church while he was a student at Trevecca, having both been shaped by a deep conviction that the Wesleyan Holiness tradition was their theological "home."

They were married while my father was pastor at his first assignment in Nashville, Tennessee, beginning their marriage in December of 1941, at the outbreak of World War 2. Shortly after their marriage they moved to Georgia, to pastor near four military training bases. They spent the remainder of the war serving families whose sons and husbands were deployed around the globe in that conflict.

But they served a deep south community, as well. And it was not long before the pattern of my father's ministry began to be shaped by his resistance to the Jim Crow laws of the deep south, and his dismay that the Church of Jesus Christ was so deeply segregated.

In the minds of many evangelicals, the 50's and 60's were the epitome of what has come to be called "Christendom." The Church was at the table. Her voice was respected, and the culture seemed to accede to the requests that the Church and her values be followed, or at least be allowed to shape some of the cultural practices.

But it was during that very era that some of the greatest tensions began to erupt in the culture. There was the "sexual revolution," when the moral values that seemed to the Church to be "self-evident," were not only challenged, but entirely rejected by cultural icons, most often portrayed through the revolutions in music style and texts, and the variety of entertainment venues. There was political turmoil, in the United States in particular, epitomized by the riots at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago. And there were the massive, often angry, conflicts over racial injustice, led most visibly by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

As it impacted my family in particular, the racial issues took on a very personal, visible, and often threatening dimension. It was not that we were threatened by the African Americans who lived in communities in or near our church and community. The greatest and most frequent threat, including physical attacks on my father, were from the white community, from those who made claims to be Christian, but who were adamantly opposed to the inclusion of Blacks in the churches, to their use of public restrooms and water fountains. These white "Christians" resisted Black demands for educational and economic opportunity, and for access to housing and jobs without restrictions based on race or ethnicity.

In his book, “The End of White Christian America,” Dr. Robert P. Jones, proposes an “obituary” for White Christian America. In it he says,

“WCA first began to exhibit troubling symptoms in the 1960’s when white mainline Protestant denominations began to shrink, but showed signs of rallying with the rise of the Christian Right in the 1980’s. Following the 2004 presidential election, however, it became clear that WCA’s powers were failing. Although examiners have not been able to pinpoint the exact time of death, the best evidence suggests that WCA finally succumbed in the latter part of the first decade of the twenty-first century.”

While I can appreciate that the “obituary” is a somewhat “tongue-in-cheek” effort to make an initial point in this very discerning book, I would tend to agree with Dr. Smith that the seeds of the demise of “Christendom” in North America were sown in the late 19th century, and in spite of some wonderful efforts in renewal and awakening, were allowed to grow through isolation and insularity that made the Church increasingly irrelevant. In ways both troubling and confusing, the Church, even within the Wesleyan Holiness tradition, seems to have been shaped as much by cultural, racial, and economic prejudices and norms as by its own biblical and theological foundations.

As it relates to the preparation of clergy, this is a difficult and complex milieu. While we must prepare competent, informed, and theologically astute pastors and leaders for the Church in North America, we must prepare them for service in local congregations that are, in many cases, more reflexive than reflective, and therefore, unwittingly resistant to what is true and just, both Biblically and theologically.

I resonate, deeply, with the suggestions in Dr. Smith’s paper for addressing the need to prepare clergy for a different culture than what we have previously prepared them to address. Perhaps it is necessary to acknowledge we have not done as adequate a job as we had thought we were doing, and that proposals like those presented in Dr. Smith’s paper should be seriously considered as a way forward.

The fourth response Smith mentions in assessing “the situation in which we find ourselves,” is both encouraging and needed. We must prepare our clergy to lead our churches into being a “faithful presence,” one that authentically reflects Kingdom values in a world so devoid of them in many key areas.

But our preparation of these clergy must take into account that our delivery systems are not consistently equipped to prepare the clergy for the kind of theological reflection so necessary to the future of the Church and her mission. And that is to say nothing of the critical necessity of equipping our laity. The way ahead for the Church is among a series of minefields, both theological, cultural, sociological, and economic, that make for a patchwork of perspectives that must be taken into account by a clergy corps that must be as wise as serpents, while yet being as harmless as doves.

The battleground we most need to prepare for may well be within the Church, rather than between the Church and the culture. Only when the scriptural values that are at the heart of Wesleyan spirituality are more pervasively embraced by the Church, both denominationally and locally, will the Church be equipped to bear toward the culture as a faithful presence. Then we can more adequately and authentically reflect Kingdom values. Then we can deeply engage in

relationship with those who differ with us or oppose our message with a stance that is hospitable, gracious, and loving while unapologetically living a holiness ethic that is winsome, courageous, and sacrificial.